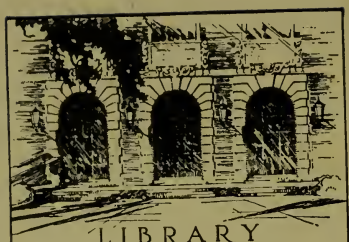
Mr. Monticello



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MR MONTENELLO.

MR MONTENELLO:

A ROMANCE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE.

BY

W. A. BAILLIE HAMILTON.

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MR MONTENELLO:

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

SAN FERNANDO.

The general impressions formed by a young gentleman sent on special service to the West Indies, whose stay in those latitudes is limited to ten days or a fortnight, are not likely to be either particularly interesting or particularly instructive to the general public. We will not therefore weary our readers with a narrative of Gerard's experiences on board the "Iberia," or during his passage in the branch steamer down the beautiful chain of islands that terminates in San Fernando. Certainly, he would be a strangely unimpressionable man who could fail to be more or less struck with the extraordinary loveliness of

these gems of the ocean; and Gerard, whose experiences as a traveller had hitherto been very limited, felt, as many others have done before him, that he was upon the threshold of a new and wonderful world.

San Fernando, however, was soon reached, and Gerard, having presented his credentials to the Governor, Sir Henry Turner, K.C.M.G., and explained the object of his mission, which excited some surprise, and, we fear, just a little amusement in the breast of that courteous and genial bachelor Viceroy, found himself with eleven days on his hands in which to see the wonders of the tropics. It is hardly necessary to say that the precious charter, the object of his expedition, was found safe enough in the Colonial Secretary's Office, a trifle musty, perhaps, and impregnated with a mingled *bouquet* of dry rot and white ants, but otherwise unimpaired and in perfect order; and a couple of confidential clerks were at once set to work to transcribe it. In the mean time, Gerard found the time hang by no means heavily on his hands. His appearance in the capacity of a special messenger from

the Home Government gave him a prestige of importance which was far from unpleasant, and much speculation was excited as to the purport of his mission, which he of course kept discreetly dark. In a small way, in fact, he might be said to have realised the position of Don Juan in London;—

> "——, a foreigner of high condition,
> The envoy of the Secret Russian Mission,"

and was made much of accordingly. He had been taken on expeditions to the primeval forest, the mysterious Pitch Lake, the wonderful Guacharo caves, and other stock lions of the country. He had breakfasted at a cocoa plantation, picnicked on an enchanted islet, been shown an "Obeah man," and danced at a ball at Government House; and on most of these occasions, we regret to say, had flirted a good deal with the fair San Fernandians, whose beauty, of the loveliest Creole type, is so renowned throughout the West Indies. He was, in fact, having a very good time of it, and we fear that the postponement of his winter arrangements in England, including a possible further expedition to the neighbour-

hood of Netherdean, did not for the moment weigh on his mind quite as much as under the circumstances it ought to have done.

He had now been five days in the island, and was sitting, one evening, quietly smoking an after-dinner cigar in company with the Governor and his aide-de-camp, and discussing his plans for the remainder of his stay.

"Let's see," observed his Excellency, tilting up his viceregal legs on to a projecting angle of the verandah where they were sitting, "you've got six days more before the mail goes back. Upon my word, I don't quite know what to recommend next. It seems to me you've done most of the regular things. After all, there is a great sameness about tropical scenery, in my opinion at least, unless you have some special exploration to make, and can devote weeks and months to it, and then of course you get the real beauties of the country; but you haven't time for that, and you've got some idea of the scenery from what you have done already. I'll tell you what, though," he continued, "you might run over to the mainland for a day or two—Venezuela,

you know. I'm going to send the Government steamer over there to-morrow night, with a message to the President at Caracas. You might go in her, and see the place, and be back in a couple of days, and then you could say you had travelled in South America, you know."

"Caracas ain't much of a place, sir," put in the aide-de-camp. "Fortescue and I were awfully bored there last year. Don't you think he had better go and see the Englishman at that place near Puerto Carrero? He would see much more of the country that way, and the steamer could drop him there, and call for him again, or he could go on to Caracas from there if he liked."

"Well, that's not a bad idea," replied his Excellency. "The Englishman, as we call him," addressing Gerard, "is a sort of patriarch, who lives with his flocks and his herds on the savannahs or downs a little way up the country. He's got a large property there, I believe, and goes in for stock-farming, and all that sort of thing, on a large scale. He's a wonderful man, and has immense in-

fluence with all the people there. Yes, I think that might do very well. I know him a little myself, as he stayed here a night or two with me two years ago, and I can give you a letter to him, and no doubt he will be very civil to you."

"Do you devilish well," observed Capt. Larkins, the aide-de-camp; "got some uncommon good horses too; give you a capital mount, and take you all over the country."

"I should like it of all things," said Gerard, "and am very much obliged to you for thinking of it. What's this gentleman's name, by the way?"

"Well, he calls himself Mr Montenello," replied the Governor, "but of course that's no more his real name than it is mine. There's no doubt whatever that he's an Englishman, but I suppose he has some reason for concealing his own name, and it doesn't matter two straws what you call yourself in that country. You know more about him than I do, however, Larkins," turning to the aide-de-camp, "as you've been to his place; but I suppose he always goes by that name there, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes, sir, if they speak of him by name, but they generally just called him 'El Senhor,' or something of that kind. He's very close, though; Fortescue and I tried to make him talk about himself, but we couldn't manage it."

"Well, I'm quite sure there's some mystery about him," returned Sir Henry, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar. "I was very much struck by him when he was here, and by the way he spoke—not that he said very much certainly, but you may depend upon it there's some story connected with him; either he has committed a murder, or he's a prince in disguise, or the head of a secret society, or something of that sort. However, there he is in the meantime; and if you like to see a little of Venezuela, Courtenay, I don't think you could do better than go and look him up. I would send Larkins with you, but I want him for a function the day after to-morrow, this new town-hall affair; so I am afraid you must go alone. I suppose he is sure to be there; isn't he, Larkins?"

"Oh yes, sir, I know he's there, because the steamboat agent told me he had seen him at

St. Thomas about three weeks ago. He had been to England on business, and was on his way back."

"Well, that confirms my idea that he's an Englishman," replied the Governor. "All right then, Courtenay; if you like to go, there you are, and I will give instructions to the captain of the steamer to look after you."

Gerard had been sitting in a reverie for the last few moments. Mr Montenello! surely he had heard that name before. And Venezuela, too! there seemed some undefinable association in his mind between the name and the country. Suddenly it all flashed across him. It was the man of whom Florence had spoken to him that first night he met her at the Shawfield ball, who had given her that little cross she wore round her neck. Yes, it must be the same; and how extraordinary that he should now be going to pay him a visit! Why, he might be able to tell him something about her, something of the mystery that seemed to enshroud her whole existence. Clearly there was a providence in it, and go he must. He

roused himself with an effort, and hurriedly expressed his thanks to the Governor.

"It is very kind indeed of you," he stammered out rather confusedly, "and I shall be only too delighted. I am sure it must be well worth seeing."

"He might go on to Caracas from there, if he liked, you know, sir," pursued Captain Larkins; "it's only about sixty miles, and of course those fellows would think nothing of riding that in a day; or he could stop about Montenello's place, and come back from Puerto Carrero. I'd do that, if I were you," he added in an undertone to Gerard; "Caracas is an infernally slow place, and you'll have much more fun with old Montenello."

"Well, you must settle that for yourself," observed the Governor; "but anyhow, I'll tell the captain of the steamer to call at Puerto Carrero on his way back if you don't join him at Caracas. Only you mustn't miss the steamer, or you'll lose the mail home, and then we shall all get into trouble. Why, your friend Mr Mills would have a fit," he continued, laughing; for we regret to state that the idea

of Gerard's expedition had presented itself to His Excellency in rather a ludicrous light than otherwise. "Well, it's about time to go to bed now, so good-night; you'll have plenty of time to make all your arrangements to-morrow. I'll write a line to Mr Montenello myself; and by the way, Larkins, see that he has a letter to the custom-house people at Puerto Carrero, and that will save him any trouble there."

So it fell out that at about eight o'clock the following evening Gerard found himself on board the government steamer "Gertrude," a smart, yacht-like little craft, but at the same time strongly built, and capable of weathering a heavy sea, and steaming out of the harbour of Spanish Town on his way to the mainland of Venezuela. It was a lovely tropical night. Behind lay the rapidly receding lights of the town, casting long reflections in the still, muddy water; on one side rose a frowning wall of rock, crowned here and there by a solitary palm-tree, and looking grim and mysterious in the uncertain light; on the other lay a fringe of innumerable fairy

islets, backed by a dark mass of forest stretching away into obscurity; and, as they passed out into the open sea, might be discerned in the far distance a dim, cloud-like line, indicating the great southern continent of America. Innumerable constellations sparkled and quivered in the heavens, and over all shone out the lustrous, silvery light of a southern moon.

Gerard stood leaning over the rail of the little bridge, smoking a cigar, and gazing dreamily at the dark mysterious land to which he was bound; and we need hardly say that on such an occasion and in the midst of such surroundings his thoughts reverted to his lady-love. It was very strange, he thought, that he should be thus thrown in the way of a man who was evidently an old friend of hers, to say the least of it, and for whom she appeared to entertain such a regard. He tried to remember exactly what she had said about Mr. Montenello at the ball, and wished he had heard something more about him during those few happy days that he had passed in her society. But, somehow or other, the name had never been mentioned

again ; and though Gerard recollected only too well the incident of the little cross, and her statement that the donor lived in Venezuela, thus leaving no room for doubt that it must be the very man he was going to visit, he had nothing further to go upon. But that he should come across any one connected with Florence in this out-of-the-way corner of the world was in itself a very remarkable thing ; and it seemed to him a happy omen of ultimate success.

He was roused from his reverie by a gruff "By'r leave, sir," from one of the crew, who were now busy in making everything snug for the night ; and the captain coming up at this moment, he resolved to try if he could not get some further information out of him. But this functionary, an ancient mariner who had knocked about the West Indies for the last five-and-thirty years, was unable to enlighten him to any great extent. "Oh yes, he knew Mr Montenello ; that's to say, he had seen him going up and down the islands now and then. Believed he had a large place in Venezuela, and was a sort of a chief there

among the Indians and Spanish, and all that lot. No, he had never been up to his place; didn't much fancy that country himself; always having a row there, and knocking each other on the head; for his part, he preferred the islands, you knew what you were about there. However, some thought it a fine country, no doubt; and they seemed pretty quiet there just now."

"What time shall we get into Puerto Carrero?" inquired Gerard.

"About eight in the morning," responded the skipper, "if it keeps as fine as this all night. We'll drop you there, and then we ought to get to La Guayra, the port for Caracas, you know, about this time to-morrow night. My orders are to stop there twenty-four hours, and if you don't join me again by that time, I'm to run into Puerto Carrero again, and pick you up there; but, mind you, I shan't wait if you're not ready then. Now then, sir, you'd better come below with me, and have a bit o' supper, and then, if you'll take my advice, you'll turn in; you may as well get a good sleep, and the night air along

this coast is apt to be a bit dangerous when you're not used to it."

So Gerard took the friendly skipper's advice, and in another hour was in his berth, listening in a half-dreamy state to the monotonous thumping of the screw and the hissing of the calm sea against the sides of the little steamer as she made her way towards the South American coast. He could not help feeling strangely excited and interested in this new adventure, as it seemed to him, that was to bring him in contact with this strange man, around whom there evidently hung some mystery, and who, at the same time, was unquestionably associated with her whom he loved best in the world. Sleep came upon him, however, before he had arrived at any definite conclusion on the subject, and his thoughts gradually resolved themselves into a confused dream, in which Mr Montenello, who had got somehow or other mixed up with Mr Collins, the office-keeper at the General Enquiry Office, and wore a respirator and blue spectacles, appeared to him with the charter of San Fernando, which it turned out had been

stolen by Lord Ballybrack for purposes connected with the turf, but which, being written in an unknown and incomprehensible language, nobody could make anything of, and informed him, with many expressions of regret, that unless he could decipher it to the entire satisfaction of Lady Mount Easton's governess, who was in attendance for the purpose in deep mourning, within the next ten minutes, not only must he give up all hopes of Florence, but it would be necessary for him to prepare for instant decapitation.

He was aroused from a contemplation of this extremely embarrassing situation by the hoarse sound of the steam whistle, and a few moments later the black steward put his head in at the cabin door, and informed him that they were in sight of Puerto Carrero, and that he would be able to go on shore in about half an hour. Gerard started up, made a hasty toilette, and got his things ready, and then went on deck to look about him. It was a still, clear morning. The long line of coast lay full in front of them, about a mile distant, broken here and there by deep bays running

in between rocky headlands, and fringed with sandy islets standing out in dazzling contrast to the deep-blue sea. In one of these bays or coves nestled the little town or village of Puerto Carrero, the red roofs and white-washed walls of the houses standing out in picturesque relief against a background of dark green foliage. On the right the ground rose abruptly in a series of rocky ridges, crowned here and there by clumps of palm-trees, while behind the town and away to the left the country presented a more undulating aspect, merging apparently into a vast plateau, and bounded in the far distance by a stately range of purple mountains.

It was a bright and beautiful picture, and Gerard felt a strange exhilaration as he gazed at the scene before him. "What a grand country!" he thought to himself; "no wonder this old fellow likes living here. Good morning, captain!" he exclaimed, as that dignitary made his appearance; "well, if all Venezuela is like this, I don't think it can be such a bad sort of country."

"Oh, country's well enough," growled the

skipper; "it's the people that live in it. Look at the beggars, they're always up to some mischief or other. Why, a chap's no sooner made president, or whatever they call it, than another fellow comes, with a gang of ruffians at his back, and knocks him on the head, or shoves him into prison; and then after a bit the same thing happens to him. No, they're a bad lot, you may depend upon it, sir. Ah! there's the boat coming out for you at last; we signalled for it a quarter of an hour ago, but these lazy devils don't seem to know what it is to be smart. It's a lumbering concern enough, but you want a heavy boat to land here, 'cos of the swell; a small boat would be knocked all to bits against that jetty."

The boat was soon alongside, a clumsy lighter-like craft, but well adapted for the purpose, and manned by half a dozen swarthy rowers. In a few minutes Gerard and his traps were on board and making way towards the jetty, on which he could already observe a small crowd collected to witness his arrival. The approach required

to be very cautiously made, to avoid being swept against the woodwork underneath. As the boat hung on the top of a roller, waiting for an opportune moment to run alongside the rough wooden steps that constituted the landing-place, Gerard looked up at the motley crowd above him; and there, among the dusky faces of Indians and mulattoes, and the sallow complexions of Spanish and Venezuelan loafers, he fancied he saw a rubicund British countenance that was not altogether unfamiliar to him. In another moment, however, they had gained the steps, and his energies were directed to clambering up the slippery woodwork. He was received at the top by a polite gentleman, whose shabby apology for a uniform was scarcely on a footing with his dignified manners, and who subsequently turned out to be the custom-house functionary, to whom his credentials from the Governor of San Fernando were addressed. While engaged in a fragmentary conversation with this official, his attention was again attracted by the face in the crowd

which he had already noticed. The man to whom it belonged was standing some little way off, among a knot of negroes, over whom he was apparently endeavouring to assert a show of authority, but who, from their grinning gestures, did not appear to regard him with the amount of respect that he evidently considered his due. At this moment he turned and came towards Gerard, who started back in astonishment. Yes, there was no doubt about it. Crowned with a huge *sombrero*, which he wore jauntily on one side, and which contrasted ludicrously with his weather-beaten and unmistakably English face, with a sort of *poncho* over his shoulders, but with his lower extremities still encased in the inevitable Wealdshire leather gaiters and hob-nailed boots, there stood before him the form of that veteran poacher, under-keeper, and generally unsatisfactory character, Joe Diddums of Easthampton!

CHAPTER XXXV.

DIDDUMS REDIVIVUS.

To say that Gerard was astonished by this most unlooked-for apparition would be to express a very feeble idea of his sensations. "Why, Diddums!" he exclaimed, hardly able to believe his eyes. "No, surely it can't be —yes it is, by Jove. Why, you old rascal, what are you doing out here?"

It must be admitted that Diddums appeared to be just as much taken aback as Gerard himself, and exhibited, moreover, certain symptoms of embarrassment that under other circumstances might have struck him as somewhat suspicious. "Well, sir," he replied, with a sort of apologetic grin and a half touch of his *sombrero*, "you see, I thought as how a bit of a change might suit me, and I was getting rather tired o' beating and all that; and so I just came away out here."

"But what made you bolt off in that way, without saying a word about it?" inquired Gerard. "Why, there was no end of a row at Easthampton; we all thought Lord Narborough was going to have a fit."

"'Deed, sir, I'm sorry for that," rejoined Diddums, with another deprecatory grin. "I'm sorry to have given his lordship any trouble; but — well, the fact is, sir," he continued with some hesitation, "I came across a friend as asked me to come along with him, and so — so I just came, you see."

"The deuce you did," returned Gerard, the thought of the mysterious stranger he had met that day at Easthampton flashing across him. "By Jove," he thought, "old Narborough may have been right, and that fellow may have had something to do with Diddums after all. Well, I must say," he continued aloud, "you've chosen a strange place to come to, Diddums; I should have thought North America or some colony would have been more in your line."

"Well, you see, sir, my friend—that's to

say, the gentleman as asked me to come—he lives here, you see, and he said as how I might as well come along of him, and so," continued Diddums, returning rather feebly to his original statement, "I thought I'd better come."

"Lives here, does he?" inquired Gerard, struck with a sudden idea. "Why, what's his name?"

"His name, sir?" replied Diddums, evidently becoming more and more embarrassed; "his name, sir? Oh, every one knows him here; got a large place near here, sir;" and then with a sort of half-defiant expression, as of a man driven into a corner, "why, his name's Mr Montenello, sir."

"Mr Montenello!" exclaimed Gerard; "why, that's the very man I'm going to see. Why, how on earth did you come to know him, Diddums?"

"Well, you see, sir," returned Diddums, speaking very slowly, and with the air of a man who is determined not to be taken advantage of, "I've known Mr Montenello some time, and a werry nice gentleman he

is — got a fine property here, sir — and he says to me, says he, 'Diddums, you come out to my place along o' me, and I'll make a man of you.' That's what he says, sir; and arter all, Easthampton's all very well, you know, sir, but a change now and then does you good, sir, and a man may get just a bit tired o' beatin' and bozzlin' about they woods all his life. 'Tain't such a bad place neither, this here, though it do seem rather warm just now; don't it, sir?"

Gerard was silent. He saw perfectly well that there was something behind, and that Diddums was determined not to tell him anything more than he thought proper. It was perfectly clear now that Diddums' disappearance from Easthampton was in some way or other connected with Mr Montenello; and indeed it seemed highly probable that the mysterious stranger by the covert side could have been no other than Mr Montenello himself. And the thought that this Mr Montenello, whoever he might be, was unquestionably associated with Florence, more intimately, perhaps, than he had any idea of,

imparted an additional and overpowering interest to the whole matter. But as it was evident that nothing more was to be got out of Diddums, he resolved to bide his time, and wait till he should meet the mysterious Montenello face to face before endeavouring further to unravel the secret.

In the meantime his things had been hoisted out of the boat, and the custom-house official, who had been superintending the operation, now motioned to him, with an air of authority, to follow him in the direction of a tumble-down-looking edifice which did duty as the local custom-house. Gerard suddenly recollected his instructions, and, pulling out his letter of introduction, handed it with a bow to the representative of the Venezuelan executive. The result was most satisfactory. The effect produced by the seal of the government of San Fernando on the outside of the envelope was evidently in itself somewhat impressive; but the contents were apparently still more so, for the great man, who had hitherto maintained an attitude of official *hauteur*, not unmingled with a certain amount

of suspicion, was now pleased to unbend and to inform Gerard, with many expressions of politeness, that it would be necessary for him to go through the form of having his baggage examined, but that he would take care that no inconvenience should thereby be caused to its owner, and should be most happy to afford him every assistance in his power in prosecuting his journey to Senhor Montenello's residence.

Gerard, who had picked up a little Spanish during his voyage out and his short stay in San Fernando, expressed his acknowledgments to the best of his ability, and followed by Diddums, who had assumed all the airs of a travelled Englishman protecting a fellow-countryman in distress, repaired to the seat of custom, where his small *impedimenta* having been marked with a piece of chalk by a dirty Creole clerk, he was informed by the head of the establishment that he was free to proceed whither he might desire.

"Now then, Diddums," said Gerard, when he had got rid of the pompous official, "how am I to get up to Mr Montenello's? I sup-

pose you will be going back some time or other, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Diddums, "we're a going back in about a couple of hours, my mate and I. He's an Englishman too, he is, but he's been here some time, so he can talk to all these people here just like one of themselves. He's away after some business of Mr Montenello's just now, but he's to meet me at this here public-house," pointing to a dirty little *posada*, "at eleven o'clock, and you'd better come along of us, sir. He'll get you a horse to ride, I've no doubt, sir, and we've got a light sort of cart as 'll take your traps."

Gerard readily assented; and as Diddums had himself, according to his own account, some business to transact on behalf of the mysterious Mr Montenello, he prepared to while away the next two hours by making himself acquainted with the objects of interest in and about Puerto Carrero. These, however, proved on further inspection to be somewhat limited; and after wandering for about half an hour among a collection of shabby-looking

white-washed houses, the inhabitants of which appeared to be more or less in a state of torpor, and to have hardly sufficient energy to take even a good stare at the stranger, he found himself back at the little wharf and jetty where he had landed, now silent and deserted, except for the presence of a few negroes basking in the sun among a heap of barrels, and a group of Creole children playing on a mudbank left by the now receding tide. The sun was already becoming powerful, and he was glad to beat a retreat to the little *posada* where he had arranged to meet Diddums. Here he established himself in a dirty little public room, where the proprietor of the establishment, in his shirt-sleeves, was playing dominoes with an unwholesome-looking patriot in the same attire, both with the inevitable cigarette in their mouths, and both smelling horribly of garlic. The room was, however, cool in comparison with the heat outside, and Gerard was glad to sit down in a corner, and, lighting a cigarette in self-defence, to ruminate quietly over the curious accident that had brought him in contact

with Diddums in such an out-of-the-way part of the world.

"Deuced odd," he thought to himself; "what on earth can the old beggar have got to do with Montenello? And who the devil is Montenello? I'm certain now he must be the fellow I saw that day at Easthampton,—should remember him anywhere. And then there's Florence and old Baldwin; why, if Montenello is so thick with them, one would think Diddums might know something about them too. However, I shall soon see Montenello, and then I'll ask him straight out about Baldwin and Florence. It's no use trying to get anything more out of old Diddums."

So Gerard smoked and reflected in a dreamy sort of way, gazing sleepily at the domino-players, and lulled into a state of drowsiness by the buzzing of innumerable insects in the verandah outside. He had, in fact, all but fallen asleep, when he was roused by the tramping of horses outside, and in another moment Diddums entered the room, followed by a smart, sailorlike-looking man, attired in a *sombrero* and a linen blouse and riding-

boots, but with an unmistakably English face.

"This be the gentleman, Tom," observed Diddums, indicating Gerard. "He's a-going to see Mr Montenello, and I told him as he'd better come along of us."

"All right, sir," said the new comer, with a civil touch of his *sombrero*. "There's two of our horses down here, and you can ride one of 'em up. It's only about eighteen miles, and we can go whenever you like. If you will show me your luggage, I will send it on in the cart."

It was pleasant to hear the sound of English voices in that strange country, and Gerard readily acquiesced in the proposed arrangement. "I'll just put on a pair of riding-breeches," he said, "and then I shall be ready whenever you like. I suppose I can change somewhere here."

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Tom, who appeared to be quite at home; and speaking a few words in Spanish to the landlord, he conducted Gerard through a passage to a small bedroom, even dirtier than the rest of the house,

and left him to make the desired alteration in his toilette.

"Thank goodness, I haven't got to sleep in this hole," thought Gerard, as he looked at the uninviting bed and generally filthy appearance of the room. "What a beastly place it is! Seems rather cool, now one comes to think of it, going and billeting oneself on a fellow without ever being asked. However, I suppose they're used to that sort of thing in this country, and anyhow I'm in for it now."

On his return to the public room he found Diddums and his friend engaged in refreshing themselves, and at their suggestion partook of a few mouthfuls of an exceedingly tough fowl, and an omelet reeking with garlic. The repast was by no means appetising, and he was glad to wash it down with a glass of execrable wine and escape into the open air. Here he found three or four horses waiting, in charge of a couple of mulatto boys. They were good-looking, wiry little animals, with a strong dash of Arab, well fitted with English saddles and bridles, and

presenting altogether a very respectable appearance. A light though strongly-built country waggon, drawn by a couple of mules, was already nearly filled with various crates and other miscellaneous articles, to which, by direction of Diddums' companion, whom he had designated as Tom, the mulattoes proceeded to add Gerard's small luggage.

"Now, sir," continued that worthy, turning to Gerard, "if you're ready, we'll be off. You can ride any of these horses you like; perhaps this one," indicating a well-shaped little chestnut mare, with a white blaze on her forehead, "will carry you best; but they're all very good horses, sir."

Gerard, nothing loth, was speedily on the back of the chestnut; and Diddums having also mounted with extreme care and deliberation, the little cavalcade got under weigh, and were soon clear of the wretched little town. For the first two or three miles the road skirted the base of a ridge of low hills, and was in fairly good condition for either horsemen or wheeled vehicles. A fresh breeze had sprung up, which tempered the increasing

heat of the sun. The sensation of being on horseback, in an entirely new country, was in itself a very pleasant one; and Gerard felt his spirits rising, and a general sense of exhilaration stealing over him. As yet, the aspect of the country was rugged without being picturesque. The low range of hills, broken by innumerable thickly-wooded ravines, shut out the prospect on the land side; and a mist hanging over the sea prevented any distant view in that direction. Here and there they passed a small *hacienda* with a coffee plantation adjoining, or encountered a ragged peasant driving a mule or donkey; but otherwise there was little sign of life. The horses were fresh, however, and the little party trotted gaily along the rocky road, the mule waggon bumping along in the rear, and contriving to maintain a very respectable pace, and keep up fairly with the horses.

But about five miles inland their route assumed a different aspect. They had been gradually ascending the whole way, and had now arrived at a sort of pass between two

low hills, where the road took a sharp turn to the right, and where a little *venta* or roadside inn appeared to indicate a customary halting-place. Here they left the road, and striking a rough track across the lower ridge of the hills, commenced the ascent of the pass. In about a quarter of an hour they were at the top; and here a view of an entirely different character burst suddenly upon them. The coast line was no longer to be seen, being shut out by the hills they had crossed, which formed a sort of amphitheatre on either side. At their feet a vast rolling prairie or savannah stretched away for miles and miles, as far as the eye could reach, only broken here and there by a clump of trees or a gleaming pool of water, and gradually melting away in a succession of undulations into the remote horizon; while on the right, in the far distance, rose a chain of purple mountains, towering one above another in silent grandeur, with here and there a snow-capped peak standing out in bold relief, and gleaming in the rays of the morning sun.

It was a lovely sight, and Gerard was unable to restrain an expression of admiration.

"Yes, sir, it's a fine country," observed Tom, whose additional cognomen Gerard had ascertained to be Lockyer, and who seemed a sharp, intelligent sort of fellow. "Pity the people ain't a bit more civilised like and a bit less lazy. If there was a few more gentlemen about like Mr Montenello, now, who would take 'em in hand and show 'em how to work, you might do almost anything here."

Gerard of course assented, being determined not to be surprised at anything more he might hear respecting the remarkable individual he was about to visit.

"Have you been long with Mr Montenello?" he inquired, more by way of keeping up the conversation than from any innate curiosity on the subject.

"No, sir, I've only been here about three years. I was carpenter's mate on board a man-o'-war, I was, sir; and I was just a-going to take my discharge, when Mr Montenello

he heard o' me from the captain, who was a friend o' his; and he wanted a carpenter, and some one as could turn his hand to anything like; and so he engaged me, he did, and I shall have been here three years come next March. There's a lot o' carpentering and what not to be done up at our place there; and Mr Montenello, he likes to have things well done, he does; and then, you see, when there's nothing much wanted in the carpentering line, I just do any odd jobs that's wanted, and that's why I came down to the port this morning, sir."

They had now reached the level ground on the other side of the pass, and had got on to the grass of the savannah, which offered the most tempting inducement for a gallop. Gerard's little chestnut shook her head, kicked up her heels, and taking the bit in her teeth, darted off, without much attempt at restraint on the part of her rider, who was quite disposed to enjoy the performance. Diddums and Tom followed at an equally useful if less headlong pace; and the waggon, now left some distance be-

hind, made the best of its way along a grassy track, which had here and there been improved by cutting or filling up into some slight resemblance to a road.

Having, however, galloped ahead for the best part of a couple of miles, Gerard thought it might be expedient to pull up; so, gradually slackening his pace, he allowed Tom and Diddums to rejoin him, and the trio jogged on again in company. The latter, perhaps shaken up by his ride, now became rather more communicative, and took upon himself to give Gerard a little general information.

"Not a bad game country this here, I fancy, sir," he observed, "though there don't seem to be much preserving hereabouts. I harn't seen no pheasants yet, nor no rabbits neither. But there's a sight o' ducks in some o' they petts," pointing to a pool about a quarter of a mile to their left, and using the old Wealdshire expression, which made Gerard feel almost as if he were at home again. "I went out shootin' the other mornin', and I killed eight couple o' ducks in no time. I could ha' sold they ducks for four shillins a

couple in Ashford Market," continued the old poacher, reflectively; "but, Lord bless you," with a half-regretful, half-contemptuous expression on his face, "there ain't no one to buy 'em here; northen' but they niggers and such-like. And then there's them snakes too; I precious nigh trod on one just as I were a-going to shoot into a lot o' ducks; and they say that if you get a bite from some on 'em, why, it's all up with you. Yes, sir, it's a fine country, no doubt; but there's some queer things in it too; and I aren't sure as Easthampton ain't the best place after all. Howsomever, here I be for the present."

With such improving conversation Diddums beguiled the time, Tom occasionally joining in the conversation, and showing himself to be of a remarkably keen and observant disposition. From him Gerard gathered that Mr Montenello had a large concession of land from the Venezuelan Government, the title to which had not as yet been disputed by successive administrations; and that he was, moreover, the owner of large herds of cattle,

which wandered freely over the *llanos* or savannahs, and gave employment to a considerable number of stockmen or *llaneros*, who, from Tom's account, all looked upon Mr Montenello as a sort of feudal chief. He spoke, moreover, of coffee plantations, systematic fruit cultivation, and other industries carried on by this Venezuelan Monsieur Montongpaw, as Gerard began to think him. "And a right good master he is, too," observed Tom, in conclusion; "why, there isn't one o' those chaps that he doesn't know all about, and he takes just as much interest in 'em as if they were his own sons. Why, there's a regular village of 'em all round about our place; and he's taught 'em to live respectable, and learned 'em to read and write, and he's got a priest, and a doctor, and I don't know what else." And Mr Lockyer, who had apparently not altogether abandoned his seafaring habits, rolled his quid in his cheek, and expectorated with much emphasis.

They had now been riding for about two hours, and had traversed some ten miles of

the savannah. So far, the signs of civilised life, since leaving the road, had been few and far between; an occasional herd of cattle in the distance, attended by one or two solitary horsemen, being the only indication that the plain was frequented by human beings. Now, however, it became evident that they were approaching inhabited dwellings. The grassy track became more beaten and diversified by wheel-marks; the herds of cattle became more numerous, and already the white walls of houses could be seen dotted about against the dark green of a wooded eminence about a couple of miles away. A team of mules met them, the drivers of which looked inquiringly at Gerard, and exchanged greetings in Spanish with Tom, while Diddums waved his hand to them in a friendly and patronising manner. The heat of the sun was now getting almost insupportable, and Gerard was glad to think that his ride was nearly over. They pushed on at a rapid trot, and were soon among a collection of neat, whitewashed cottages and cabins, for the most part thatched with palm leaves,

and surrounded by patches of cultivated ground. Passing through these, and by various foldyards and outbuildings indicative of a large cattle-farming establishment, they came upon an open space tastefully planted with tropical trees and flowering shrubs; and wheeling to the left into a sort of courtyard, pulled up in front of a spacious and well-built *hacienda*.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LOS ANGELOS.

"Mr Montenello is away, sir, I think," said Tom, as they dismounted at a flight of wooden steps leading up to a door which opened into a large, cool-looking hall or vestibule; "but there'll be some of the people about who will look after you." And as he spoke, two or three negro servants emerged from various corners where they had been basking in the sun, and commenced chattering volubly. Attracted, too, by the hubbub, a "coloured gentleman" of somewhat higher position appeared at the top of the steps, and motioning the inferior domestics to get out of the way, approached Gerard in the most urbane and condescending manner. The state of affairs being explained to him by Tom, he was so obliging as to express his entire approval, and begged Gerard to come in and

make himself at home. "Mass' Montenello, sah, he away after them dam Indians, sah; dam scoundrels, sogers too; call 'emselves sogers, nothing but thieves, I says. Walk in, sah; Mass' Montenello berry glad to see you. Me Pedro, sah, Mass' Montenello steward, head man, sah."

So Gerard entered, and found himself in the house of the man of whose existence he had first heard from the lips of his far-away love, and about whom there seemed, apart from his association with her, to be such a halo of mystery and interest. Passing through the hall, which was tastefully arranged with ferns and tropical plants, and cooled by a little fountain, into the marble basin of which a tiny jet of water plashed and tinkled with a deliciously refreshing sound, he followed the sable major-domo into a small apartment that was evidently the *sanctum* of the master of the house. The room was hung round with guns, rifles, and various sporting implements, and one or two handsome skins were stretched on the floor. A large book-case ran across one end of the

room, and a few prints and water-colour sketches adorned the walls. There was little actual furniture, however, beyond a large writing-table and one or two wicker lounging-chairs; and had it not been for the unmistakably tropical appearance of the sun-blinds and the verandah outside, it might have passed for the "den" or smoking-room of an English country squire. But there was something that particularly attracted Gerard's eye as he glanced round the room. It was a portrait of a lady in a stand on the writing-table. Even at a distance he thought he recognised the face, and a closer inspection showed that he was right, and that it was a beautifully coloured photograph of Florence Graham.

Knowing the intimacy that existed between them, Gerard could hardly feel much surprised at finding a photograph of his lady-love in the possession of Mr Montenello. He was, in fact, inclined to feel more annoyed than surprised, and to indulge in some resentment against the man to whose abode accident had so curiously wafted him, for

being the owner of what he would have so prized himself. "Hang the fellow!" he thought, "why the devil should he have this lovely thing of her, while I haven't got even the commonest photograph?" A moment's reflection, however, showed him that there was probably not much ground for jealousy on his part, and that nothing was more natural than that an old friend in a distant country should be in possession of such a portrait. In the meantime, it was very nice to come across a likeness of her in such a place, and he felt very tender as he gazed upon the face that was so dear to him — dearer than ever, he thought, in spite of all the mystery and uncertainty that seemed to place such a barrier between them.

He was roused from his reverie, however, by the return of his dusky friend, who had left him alone for a moment, and who was now followed by two or three other domestics of the same complexion, grinning from ear to ear, and anxious to have a peep at the stranger. These intruders were, however,

sternly repressed by the major-domo, anxious to exhibit himself in Gerard's eyes as a personage of the first importance.

"Get away, you niggers!" he exclaimed, in disgust. "What debbil you want here? Gen'leman not want to see your ugly face." And then, addressing himself to Gerard, "Like some breakfast, sah—luncheon, sah? Get something ready d'rectly, sah."

Gerard's long ride had given him a healthy appetite, and he readily accepted the offer of refreshments, leaving it to his deputy host to decide as to the character of the repast. He had not long to wait; and in twenty minutes was sitting down, in a cool little Indian-matted dining-room, before a first-rate omelet and some cunning preparation of fowl, accompanied by a bottle of excellent light claret, to all of which he did ample justice. Nor could he complain of suffering from solitude, for he was waited upon with much assiduity by his friend Pedro, who lost no opportunity of improving the visitor's mind by his own edifying conversation. He was glad, indeed, when his repast was over,

to get rid of his loquacious attendant by intimating that he was rather tired, and would prefer being left alone till Mr Montenello's return, which he was given to understand would probably be in another hour or two. So he established himself in a wicker chair in the verandah, and lighting an excellent cigar that had been given him by the Governor of San Fernando, prepared for a little quiet enjoyment.

Through the wooden blinds of the verandah he obtained a peep of a pretty lawn, planted with all manner of flowering shrubs, and with one or two stately palms towering above a mass of dark-green foliage; beyond stretched an indistinct line of bush and prairie, shimmering in the golden haze of a tropical noon; and in the far distance rose the blue outline of the mountains. Not a sound was to be heard but the eternal buzzing of the countless insects, and an occasional croak or screech from some domesticated cranes and other curious birds that wandered about among the tree-ferns and rhododendrons in a listless manner, with apparently a vague

idea of picking up something to eat. Even the chattering of the negroes and miscellaneous loafers in the courtyard had been subdued by the intense heat, and all nature seemed to have acquiesced in the necessity for a mid-day siesta.

Gerard, reclining in his wicker chair and deriving much satisfaction from his cigar, was by no means disinclined to succumb to the general *dolce far niente*. His interest had at first been aroused by a glimpse of one or two shapely Creole girls, flitting round the corner of the verandah, and evidently by no means devoid of curiosity regarding himself. But these nymphs had now disappeared, and he was left entirely to his own reflections. These, it is hardly necessary to say, had a tendency to gravitate in a general way towards Florence. "Fancy if she could see me here," he thought, "in this chap's house. She'll probably hear about it, by the way, as he's pretty certain to write and tell her. By Jove! I might get him to give me a message or something when I go back, that would be an excuse for seeing

her again." Then he fell back upon the old speculation as to what the connection between old Mr Baldwin and Mr Montenello could be, and who Florence was herself. As to this, however, he was determined to try and find out something from his present host. "I'll just ask him straight out," he thought, "and if he seems a decent sort of fellow, why, hang it! I'll tell him all about it. He can't possibly be spooning her himself, and it's quite likely he might do me a good turn." But the more he pondered the sleepier he became, until, by degrees, his head drooped upon his breast, the half-finished cigar escaped from his lips, and he sank into a profound slumber.

He must have slept for more than an hour, when he was aroused by the trampling of horses outside, accompanied by a confused murmuring of voices, among which he recognised the consequential accents of his friend Pedro; and in another moment the door was thrown open by that gentleman, and a tall figure, attired in riding-boots and a loose tunic belted round the waist, entered

the room. Gerard jumped up in a hurry, and advanced to meet him. It was just as he had expected. As he told a certain person not very long afterwards, he could not feel actually surprised, but he was unable to repress a start, and a strange, indescribable feeling for which he was unable to account, as, in spite of the change of dress, he recognised in a moment the man whom he had met by the covert side that bright October afternoon at Easthampton.

For a moment, however, the recognition was not mutual. The room was darkened by sun-blinds, and the master of the house had evidently not altogether grasped the circumstances under which Gerard had made his appearance, and looked upon him as a chance traveller. But the reception of his guest was none the less courteous on this account. "Very glad to see you, sir," he began. "I am sorry I was not in when you arrived, but I have been out on some troublesome business since daylight. I hope my people have looked after you, however?"

Gerard hastened to assure him that he had been well taken care of, and then to explain his uninvited presence. "I feel as if I ought to apologise for paying you such an unceremonious visit, without having the pleasure of your acquaintance," he began; "but Sir Henry Turner, with whom I have been staying, assured me that I might venture to do so, otherwise I should really have felt quite ashamed of myself. I had better give you his letter at once."

"Pray don't talk of it, sir," interrupted his host. "I should be delighted to see you anyhow, but all the more so for being a friend of Sir Henry Turner's. We don't often see an Englishman about here, I can tell you, and a visitor is a great excitement to us. By the way," breaking open the seal of the letter, "I ought to have inquired your name."

"My name is Cour——" replied Gerard; but the words were hardly out of his mouth when Mr Montenello, who had scanned the first few lines of the letter,

gave a perceptible start, and shot a glance of keen inquiry at him that for the moment was most embarrassing. He recovered himself, however, in an instant, and remarked, "Ah yes, I see. Well, Mr Courtenay, I shall be delighted to do anything I can to show you what there is to be seen here, though I'm sorry to see by Sir Henry's letter that you will only be able to stop a day or two. However, we'll do the best we can. This is our rainy season, and we are very lucky in having these few fine days. Now then, if you'll come with me, I'll see where we can put you up. You mustn't expect anything very grand here, but I daresay you won't mind roughing it a little."

Gerard followed in silence. It had been impossible for him to avoid being struck by the remarkable effect that his name appeared to have produced upon his host. "What the deuce can it mean?" he thought to himself. "By Jove! she's told him, that's what it is, and naturally he'd be a bit sur-

prised at seeing me here!" And his spirits rose as he reflected that Florence would hardly have said anything about it unless she had been a good deal interested in him either one way or the other, or, at any rate, would not have said enough to account for Mr Montenello's singular demeanour. "My darling," he thought to himself; "fancy if she really cares for me, after all!" And he felt more and more determined to take Mr Montenello into his confidence, and endeavour to enlist his sympathies.

Mr Montenello led the way across the hall down a passage. "I think this will do for you," he said, pausing at a door about half-way down. Gerard followed him into the room, a neat though scantily furnished apartment, with a camp bedstead and fittings to correspond. The room was somewhat dark, and his host went to the window and threw open the jalousies. As he glanced round the room, Gerard noticed that his eye seemed to light upon a water-colour sketch hanging over the bed. "No, by the way,"

he continued, rather hurriedly, "I think there's another room that you will like better," and he hastily shut the blinds and went out of the room. Gerard glanced at the picture as he passed, but was unable to make out anything in the uncertain light beyond a very ordinary English landscape —a large house, standing apparently in a park, with a background that might be hills, or woods, or anything. But somehow or other it seemed to remind him of a place that was not unfamiliar to him; and the incident only served to increase his perplexity, and to make him resolve more firmly than ever to endeavour by some means or other to get to the bottom of the mystery that unquestionably surrounded his host.

There was evidently, however, plenty of accommodation in the *hacienda;* and Gerard was soon established in a room with the arrangements of which the master of the house appeared perfectly satisfied. Here they were joined by Pedro with Gerard's things; and Mr Montenello having excused

himself on the plea of business, Gerard was once more left to his own devices. "It's too hot just now to do anything much out of doors," observed his host, "but it will be cooler in another hour or so, and then, if you like, we will take a stroll round before dinner. I daresay you have had enough riding already for to-day."

Having unpacked and arranged his things, it appeared to Gerard that the best thing he could do would be to go back and sit in the verandah until his host should rejoin him. So he retraced his steps, first to the little dining-room, and then to the room into which he had first been shown, with a general idea of having another look at Florence's photograph. As he crossed the hall, he observed two or three doors, through one of which, being half open, he took the liberty of peeping. He found himself in a large, well-proportioned apartment, which might have made a handsome drawing-room, but which was totally destitute of furniture, and evidently never made use of. His curiosity

being aroused, and there appearing to be no one about, he opened another door, and found another smaller room in the same condition. It seemed evident, in fact, that the only inhabited reception-rooms were the two with which he had already made acquaintance. "Well, it's quite clear the old boy's a bachelor," thought Gerard; "there are evidently no ladies about. Widower, though, more likely; a fine old fellow like that must probably have been married some time or other; however, that's no affair of mine."

He then sauntered into the little study or sanctum, and took another good look at Florence's photograph. Having derived much satisfaction from this, it suddenly occurred to him to go back and look at the picture in the first bedroom into which Mr Montenello had taken him, the sight of which appeared to have changed that gentleman's views as regards his guest's accommodation. He could not mistake the room; it was the first door on the right down the passage.

He turned the handle noiselessly, and entered with the feeling of being about to commit a petty larceny. Creeping softly to the window, he let in a ray of light, and then proceeded to examine the mysterious work of art. There was certainly nothing remarkable about it; a somewhat hard water-colour sketch, evidently the work of an amateur, whose instincts tended more towards a map-like and Chinese representation of the original than towards any artistic ideal. But it was evidently correct, as regards the windows and doors of the house, at least, to a nicety; and Gerard recognised it in a moment. There was the conservatory, with its curious flight of outside steps leading up to the drawing-room; the great staircase window, and a very peculiar and obtrusive buttress at the corner by the north porch, of which excrescence the artist had conscientiously made the most. There was no room whatever for doubt; it was a sketch of Easthampton Park.

Gerard was more puzzled than ever. There

seemed to be no end to the mystery. Here was a man, who was intimately associated with Florence Graham, who had, as it were, abducted Diddums from Easthampton, and who, it was clear from his having that sketch in his possession, was in some way or other interested in the place itself. What the devil did it all mean? And why should there have been any objection, as certainly had appeared to be the case, to his seeing the sketch? However, that didn't matter so much; but it was absolutely necessary that he should find out about Florence. And he returned to his seat in the verandah, feeling almost as if he had a personal grievance against Mr Montenello, and resolved to get to the bottom of the mystery by some means or other before he went away.

An hour or two later, Gerard was sitting at dinner with his host, having in the mean time been taken on a short tour of inspection in the immediate vicinity of the *hacienda*. He had been much struck by the regularity and order displayed on every side, and by the

evident care and labour that had been bestowed upon the creation of a sort of model farm or settlement in this lonely South American prairie. Rough but neat and comfortable stabling for apparently innumerable horses; cattle-sheds and pens without end; carpenters' and blacksmiths' shops; long rows of neat labourers' cabins, bordered by trim gardens ablaze with tropical flowers; and, in short, every apparent requisite for the maintenance of a small social community, not omitting a neat little red-roofed chapel, with a schoolhouse adjoining, the necessity for which latter was demonstrated by the numbers of woolly-headed children of various sizes and shades of colour rolling and playing about in front of the cabin doors.

As they sat alone after dinner, Gerard was unable to avoid complimenting his entertainer upon the completeness of everything about the place, and the order and discipline that appeared to reign everywhere. "You seem to have established a regular little kingdom here," he said, "and have certainly got all

your subjects in wonderful order. I should never have dreamed of finding such a place in Venezuela. By the way, though," he continued, endeavouring to appear at his ease, but conscious of failing signally in the attempt, "I think I've heard about you in England. I—I think you know a Miss Graham, who lives near Shawfield, in Wealdshire, don't you? I remember hearing her mention your name."

Mr Montenello looked at him hard, but manifested no surprise. "Yes," he replied, slowly, and as if weighing his words, "yes, I know Miss Florence Graham. It was at Netherdean that you met her, I suppose?" he added, rather abruptly, and, as appeared to Gerard, with a certain sternness in his manner.

"No, it was at a ball at Shawfield," replied Gerard, his thoughts reverting to that memorable evening; "that's to say, it was there that I was introduced to her. I had seen her before, but I didn't know then who she was."

"Ah," returned his host, dryly. "Well, I daresay you didn't expect then that you were ever going to meet a friend of hers in Venezuela. Yes," he continued, as if anxious to change the subject, "I think the place here is in pretty good order, and I've managed to make some of these fellows see that a little regular work is not a bad thing; and I believe they trust in me to a certain extent. But I have been the best part of thirty years at it, so one ought to have something to show for that."

"Thirty years!" echoed Gerard; "you must be very fond of this country, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Mr Montenello, with a certain sadness in his voice, and a strange, weary look in his face, that for the moment made him look very much older, "it has been my lot in life, and perhaps it has all been for the best. Anyhow, I hope I have done my duty, and that when I am gone my name will perhaps be not altogether

forgotten here. But come," he added, "it's no use talking about that. We will have a cigar, and I daresay you will not be sorry to turn in early. Pedro, bring the coffee into the verandah."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

GERARD was roused from a sound, dreamless sleep by the tramping of footsteps and a murmur of conversation, not only in the passage outside his door, but, as it seemed to him, in the court-yard under his window. He started up, and, rubbing his eyes, stumbled out of bed, with a vague impression that something was going on. It was early dawn. Far away into the obscure distance stretched the long line of the apparently boundless *llanos*, like a calm tropical sea, a dark and mysterious expanse merging gradually into a misty horizon, where a few faint streaks betokened the advent of another day. A solemn stillness pervaded the whole face of nature—that strange, unearthly quiet which immediately precedes sunrise. Immediately outside the *hacienda*, however, all was bustle

and confusion. Lights gleamed here and there; horses were being led about; there was much jabbering in Spanish and negro-English; and, in short, it seemed clear that something unusual was going forward.

"What the deuce is up?" thought Gerard; "I may as well see what it's all about;" and putting on one or two articles of attire, he opened his door and went out into the passage. Here he met his friend Pedro, rushing about in a state of great excitement, from whom he gathered that something or other had happened in connection with "they dam Indians." Passing on to the hall he found the master of the house himself, fully attired in riding costume, and with a couple of revolvers buckled round his waist. He was giving orders in rapid succession to various more or less excited individuals, but appeared himself to be perfectly cool and collected.

"Ah, Mr Courtenay," he exclaimed, on catching sight of Gerard, "I'm afraid all this noise has disturbed you. I'm sorry to say they have just brought in one of my

herdsmen, who has been shot at and badly wounded by some of these ruffians who have been hanging about here lately; and we must go after them at once, and try and clear them out of the place, or we shall have no end of trouble with them. But I'm very sorry you have been disturbed, and I should think you had better go to bed again."

"But mayn't I come with you?" asked Gerard, thinking that an expedition of this sort would be a new and unlooked-for excitement; "I should like it of all things."

"Well, I think you had much better not," replied Mr Montenello. "I hardly suppose these fellows will show fight, but there seem to be a good many of them, and it is just possible that we may exchange a shot or two. It would never do, you know, for you to get hurt while under my charge. I don't know what Sir Henry Turner would say, and your friends in England too, for the matter of that."

"Oh, pray don't think of that!" exclaimed Gerard, determined not to miss such a chance.

"I can look after myself, I assure you, and I shouldn't at all like to be left behind. I don't suppose I'm the least likely to get shot; and anyhow, I'm quite ready to take my chance, if you don't mind my coming with you."

"Well, I don't suppose there will be any very great danger," replied Mr Montenello, smiling at Gerard's keenness, "and if you are determined to come, so be it. You can have the horse you rode yesterday, if you like. But we shall be off in about ten minutes, so you must look sharp."

"I'll be ready in five minutes," returned Gerard, delighted at the prospect; and he hurried back to his room, where he proceeded to get as quickly as possible into his riding things. While so occupied, a cup of coffee and some biscuits were brought to him by Pedro, and before the ten minutes were over he was quite ready to start.

"You may as well put this on," said Mr Montenello, handing him a belt with a revolver and cartridges; "not that I think there is much chance of your having to use

it, but there is no harm in being armed on an occasion like this. Now then, if you are ready we will be off."

The open space in front of the door presented an animated appearance. Some fifteen or twenty horsemen were now assembled, tightening girths, adjusting arms, and getting everything in readiness for a march. Groups of excited negroes and mulattoes were clustered about, some brandishing torches or lanterns, and others assisting, or pretending to assist, in the preparations for departure, but one and all chattering at the top of their voices, and rather impeding than accelerating matters by their well-meant officiousness. The appearance of Mr Montenello at the door, however, had the effect of producing a certain amount of order, and silencing the cackle of human voices. The mounted men, who had evidently undergone some rough and ready process of drilling, fell into a line in fair order; while one or two, who appeared to be in a position of trust and authority, rode out to the front to salute and take the orders of their chief.

"Juan," said Mr Montenello in Spanish, addressing a grizzled, weather-beaten veteran, "take four men with you, and ride straight away to Diego's ranch. If you see any number of men hanging about there, send a man back at once to report, and halt well out of shot of the ranch, under cover if you can. We shall not be far behind, and shall soon catch you up."

The old man inclined his head with a sort of military salute, and turning round to his comrades, called four men by name, who at one set spurs to their horses, and sprang out to the front with a smartness that would have done credit to any dragoons. Their leader wheeled sharply to the right, and the whole went off at a gallop, and were soon lost to view in the still dim and uncertain light.

"Now then," said Mr Montenello, turning to Gerard, "if you will mount, we will be off. Here's your horse," as a negro led up the same animal that Gerard had ridden the day before, "and you'll find her carry you just as well as yesterday." And mounting his own,

a powerful iron-grey that would have aroused pangs of envy in the breast of a "squadron leader" of the Greys, he moved out of the line, now sitting "at attention," and addressed to them a few words in Spanish. His observations were received with a murmur of approval; and, falling into a rough formation of "half-sections," the little band moved off at a brisk trot, headed by their leader and Gerard.

They soon cleared the confines of the *hacienda*, and were out upon the vast expanse of the *llanos*. It was yet barely daybreak, and for the moment it seemed darker than ever. But a golden streak of light was slowly but surely creeping up in the east, and in a few minutes more the dark vault of heaven was illumined by the first rays of a tropical sunrise. The outlines of trees and shrubs began to show distinctly against the sky; birds began to chirp and twitter in the grass; and the world had once more woke up into life.

Gerard felt a strange exhilaration stealing

over him as he rode along in the fresh morning air. The novelty of the situation, the wildness of the surroundings, and the general uncertainty of what was going to happen next, to say nothing of the ever-increasing puzzle as to the connection between his Florence, far away in Wealdshire, and the mysterious man in whose company he found himself, imparted a tinge of romance to his position that, to his somewhat imaginative temperament, was very fascinating. The little chestnut stepped out gaily under him, as if the journey of the preceding day had been nothing more than ordinary exercise; the tramp of horses and the jingle of bridles and spurs around him had a cheery and exhilarating effect; and altogether he felt in high spirits.

They trotted sharply on for some time in silence, along a sort of half-defined grassy track. Gradually the sky grew lighter and lighter, and the outlines of the vast plain spread out clearly before them. The blue ridges of the distant mountains began to show themselves out of a curtain of mist;

here and there a sheet of water shone out in the rays of the sun, now well above the horizon; and everything looked fresh and bright. Strings of clamorous wildfowl passed over their heads, returning from their nocturnal feeding-grounds to the reedy pools which formed their resting-place during the day, and making Gerard's mouth water for a shot. Herds of cattle appeared every now and then in the distance, with a mounted herdsman or two hovering about them; but as yet there was no sign of anything like a body of men, either friendly or otherwise.

They had travelled for about six miles without drawing rein, when a man on horseback was observed in the distance moving towards them at a gallop. The little column, at a word from their chief, quickened their pace, and in a few moments the solitary horseman was recognised as one of the advanced guard. As he drew near, Mr Montenello rode forward to meet him, making a sign to the remainder to halt. The colloquy did not last long, and the messenger

wheeled about and galloped back in the direction from whence he had come.

"They have seen a few suspicious-looking men hanging about near the ranch," said Mr Montenello to Gerard as he rejoined him, "but not in any strength. We had better get on, however;" and addressing a few words in Spanish to the little troop, they set out again at a brisk pace. Another couple of miles brought them to the ranch, now a roofless ruin, but still affording a certain amount of shelter behind its broken-down walls. Here they found the advanced guard, who had dismounted, and were smoking and lounging by their horses, with the exception of one man, who was posted as a sentinel about a couple of hundred yards away.

"We will stop here a bit," said Mr Montenello to Gerard, and gave the order to dismount.

In another moment the party had filed into the enclosure; the men had dismounted, and were easing girths, looking about for water for their horses, or lighting the in-

evitable cigarette for themselves; and the usually deserted ranch assumed the appearance of a cavalry picquet.

Mr Montenello, who had been the last to dismount, was now holding a conference with old Juan, the commander of the advanced guard, and with another herdsman who had just turned up, and who, from his excited manner and profuse gesticulations, appeared to have something of importance to communicate. The chief, however, did not appear to be proportionately impressed, and exhibited a coolness and indifference that presented a great contrast to the excited demeanour of his companions. Having at length apparently obtained all the information that it was in the power of these worthies to communicate, he called up three or four of the leading men of his party, and gave them some orders in Spanish. And then, turning to Gerard,—

"I am afraid," he said, "that we shall have to go on, and that this may be rather a long business. The fact is, these fellows, half of whom are Indians and the rest dis-

banded soldiers, who are almost the greater ruffians of the two, have driven off a number of our cattle, and we are bound to go after them; but they seem to have got some miles ahead, and have just left one or two behind to watch us. I really think you had better go back, for we may very possibly have to camp out, and at this damp season it is apt to be dangerous if you are not used to it. I can send a man back with you, and you can ride quietly home."

This proposal, however, did not at all meet Gerard's views. It would never do, he thought, to go home in this ignominious way, just as there seemed a chance of something like a real adventure.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I had much rather stay with you and see it out. I can stand roughing it pretty well, I assure you; and if I shan't be in the way, I should like very much to go on."

"Very well," replied Mr Montenello, evidently not displeased at Gerard's enthusiasm, "you must do as you think best. Now then, we must be off again." And in another

minute or two they had remounted, and the deserted ranch was left once more to the lizards and chameleons that were its usual inhabitants.

They now proceeded with greater precautions, as if in the neighbourhood of an enemy. Old Juan and his advanced guard were again sent on ahead, and a single horseman was detached as a scout on each flank. Not that there appeared much danger of the appearance of the enemy without due warning; for except in one direction, the *llanos* stretched away all round, and a horseman or any similar object could easily be seen at a considerable distance. Straight in front of them, however, about three or four miles away, was some broken ground, with a few clumps of trees, beyond which the ground gradually rose till it joined on to a low-lying spur of the hills that bounded one side of the plain. It was in this direction that the men seen by the advanced guard had retired, and here, if taken proper advantage of, there was cover for any number of men.

They had arrived within a quarter of a mile

of the first clump of trees, round which Juan and his men were circling at a gallop, the remainder slackening their pace, and keeping a good look-out on all sides, when all of a sudden some five or six strange horsemen rose up, as it were, out of the ground about five hundred yards to the right, and galloped away at full speed towards the hills. A yell arose from the troop, and half-a-dozen men dashed forward in pursuit. "Steady!" shouted Mr Montenello in a tone of command, spurring his horse to the front, and restraining the others. With a wave of his hand he signalled to one of his lieutenants to go forward with those who had already started, and called to the remainder to follow him. Directing his course slightly to the left, and closely followed by Gerard, he led the way in what seemed rather a contrary direction from that which the fugitives had taken. "We must get round them," he explained to Gerard, who was riding close at his side; "they can't go far that way because of the rough ground, and our men will turn them to us. We are sure to catch them."

It soon became apparent that Mr Montenello was right. The strange horsemen had been concealed in one of those curious ravines or fissures that are not uncommon in the volcanic soil of the *llanos*, and were now straining every nerve to reach the shelter of the wooded spur in front. To reach this, however, they would have to cross a deeper and more precipitous ravine, which now made itself apparent, and which, while it might possibly have been crossed in safety by horses carefully picking their way at a foot's pace, would have been a most dangerous if not impassable obstacle to men going at full gallop. Their pursuers were not far behind; and after hesitating for a moment, they apparently decided to avoid the ravine, and make for the friendly woods by a longer *détour* across the plain; thus, however, bringing themselves between two fires, as it were, and decreasing their distance from the party led by Mr Montenello. This was exactly what the latter had expected. "I know the ground better than they do," he said with a smile to Gerard, touching his horse lightly

with the spur, "and they can't well get away from us."

The chase had now lasted some seven or eight minutes. Mr Montenello and Gerard, being better mounted than the majority of their followers, were some fifty yards ahead, and a somewhat lengthening "tail" showed that the pace was beginning to tell. The wooded slopes of the hillside were now not far distant, and a few minutes more would settle the question. The fugitives were making for a point some seven or eight hundred yards away, where a rocky opening seemed to indicate a sort of rough road up into the higher ground. But a little short of this point was a wooded promontory or spit of vegetation which ran out into the plain, and which had to be passed by Mr Montenello and his party in order to cut off the retreat of the others. They were flying along about a hundred yards from the wood when suddenly a puff of smoke, followed by two or three sharp reports, floated out from the bushes, and Gerard, who was a little way behind Mr Montenello,

saw, to his horror, that he swerved in his saddle, and then bent slowly forward over his horse's neck.

"Good God, he's shot!" exclaimed Gerard, putting spurs to his horse, and closely followed by two or three of those behind who had also witnessed the occurrence. It was evident that their leader had lost all command over his horse, which, under these circumstances, might very probably have bolted with him. But the pace had been very severe, and the animal gradually subsided into a trot. In another moment an active young *llanero* had caught him by the bridle, and half-a-dozen arms were stretched out to help their chief to the ground.

They lifted him gently down, and laid him tenderly on the grass. It was not a moment too soon, for his face had turned a deadly white, and they had scarcely got him clear of his horse when he closed his eyes and fainted away. Old Juan threw himself on the ground, and pillowed his master's head on his knees.

"Madre de Dios!" exclaimed the old man,

in tones of anguish, the tears rolling down his weather-beaten cheeks, "he is dying. Holy Virgin, help us! what shall we do?"

"Caramba! don't crowd on him so!" exclaimed an English voice; and looking up, Gerard recognised his friend Tom Lockyer, who had not formed one of the original expedition, but who, as it subsequently appeared, had followed with another man on his own account. "Give him some air for Heaven's sake, or he won't be able to breathe." And by dint of entreaties and the use of a certain amount of force, he succeeded in clearing a space round the wounded man. "Now get some water, and sprinkle it on his face," he continued, as he took his master's hand in his, and felt the scarcely throbbing pulse. "He'll come to, never fear; it's only just a swoon."

But his face belied his words; and Gerard's eye, following his, caught sight of a dark spot of blood on Mr Montenello's breast, that seemed to grow larger and larger, and spoke of a serious wound.

"Now, Ramon," continued Tom, who had

assumed the direction of affairs, addressing the young man who had brought the water, —the same who had stopped Mr Montenello's horse,—"you gallop home as fast as you can, and bring up the doctor. We will try and get the Senhor down part of the way towards home, and meet you. And make Sancho yoke his team to the new waggon, and come up as quick as he can; we shall get him home better that way."

The young man nodded assent, and vaulting on to his horse, darted away like an arrow across the plain. All eyes were now turned upon the motionless form of Mr Montenello. He still lay in a swoon, the noble features rigid as in death, and the faint beating of his heart alone showing that life was not extinct. Old Juan from time to time tenderly moistened his face with water, while Tom held the almost pulseless hand, watching for the slightest return of animation. They had opened his shirt, and the wound was now apparent—a dark, hideous spot on the right breast. There was little external bleeding; "a bad sign that,'

murmured Tom, shaking his head; and it was evident that nothing further could be done at the moment.

In the mean time some ten or twelve of the band had detached themselves from the others and struck off in the direction of the hills, in the hope of overtaking and wreaking vengeance on the cowardly marauders. But far too great a start had been allowed; and before long the detachment was seen returning slowly from the hill-side, in the dejected manner peculiar to men who have failed in their enterprise.

An hour passed away, slowly and sadly, during the greater part of which Mr Montenello lay in a deadly stupor. At last, however, some symptoms of returning consciousness began to manifest themselves. He slowly opened his eyes, gave one or two gasps, and looked around in a dazed manner, like a man in a dream. He tried to raise his head, and his lips moved, as if in an attempt to speak; but the effort was too much for him, and he sank back again into

Juan's arms, with a long-drawn sigh that was painful to hear.

"We must try and move him," said Tom, decisively, looking round on the melancholy group; "if we don't get the doctor to him soon, it will be all up with him. We must just carry him till we meet the waggon, and then see what the doctor says."

During the long weary wait, the men had busied themselves, under Tom's direction, in constructing a rough sort of litter out of girths and horse-furniture. This was now placed on the ground by the side of their chief, who was tenderly lifted into it. Six men, kneeling down, three on each side, slowly and carefully raised the litter on to their shoulders, and moved off with it at a foot's pace. The movement did not appear to cause Mr Montenello pain, and he lay with half-closed eyes; without showing any further uneasiness.

Slowly the melancholy cavalcade moved across the plain, the litter with the wounded man and the led horses of the bearers giving a funereal appearance to the little band that

but an hour or two before had swept along in all the eager pride of horsemanship. Every eye was anxiously strained in the direction of the *hacienda;* and by the time they had advanced about a mile, some dark specks were seen in the distance, which, moving at a rapid pace, were soon made out to be a wheeled vehicle accompanied by three or four men on horseback. "Thank God, here they come!" ejaculated Tom, a sentiment that was heartily echoed by the rest; "we may as well stop now, and wait till they come up to us."

It was not long before the forms of the advancing party were clearly made out, and in a few minutes more they were close at hand. They came up, waggon and all, at full gallop; and even in the distress and anxiety of the moment, Gerard could not help being struck by the way in which the driver of the waggon, a stalwart young negro, handled his team of fine mules, behind which the light waggon bounded and jolted like a shuttlecock over the uneven grassy surface of the savannah. A bed had been placed

in the waggon; and on this, by the direction of the doctor, the almost unconscious form of Mr Montenello was gently laid. The party formed round the waggon as an escort, and at a foot's pace the sad procession set out once more towards home.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

It was getting on for midnight. Gerard was sitting alone in the little study or smoking-room, where he had been, in fact, for the last three or four hours. They had brought him some supper, which, after the fatigue and excitement of the day, was very acceptable; and since then he had been sitting waiting, in a state of vague and fearful expectation, for the announcement that he knew must shortly come. For there could be no doubt about it—Mr Montenello was dying. The doctor, an intelligent young Englishman, had made a thorough examination of the wound as soon as they got him home, and had pronounced it to be of the most serious description. The bullet had penetrated the right lung and lodged itself under the shoulder-blade, in a locality from

which it would have been most dangerous, if not impossible, to attempt to remove it. There had been great internal hæmorrhage, and were this to come on again, which was only too probable, it was barely possible that the wounded man could survive. Such was the melancholy bulletin that had been announced to Gerard, Pedro, Diddums, and those immediately about Mr Montenello's person, and from them caught up and circulated to a rapidly increasing crowd that was clustering round every corner of the *hacienda*, struggling with and jostling one another for news of their beloved master, and only restrained by the adjurations and threats of those about him, backed by the authority of the doctor, who pronounced that perfect quiet was the only chance, from forcing their way into the building itself.

Gerard had remained for a time in the wounded man's room, until advised by the doctor to retire. He was now sitting crouched up in a lounging chair, gazing in a dreamy sort of way, by the light of a solitary lamp, at the portrait of Florence on the table, and

thinking to what an extraordinary chain of events his expedition to San Fernando had led. He had been brought into contact, by the merest accident, with this mysterious friend of Florence's, from whom it had seemed highly probable that he would be able to obtain some information respecting her; and now the angel of death was about to step in between them. It was all very strange and terrible; and the more he thought of it, the more extraordinary his position appeared to him.

As he sat there in a half-stupefied state, wondering what was going to be the end of it all, and occasionally thinking how he should get back to San Fernando, he heard a sudden murmur of voices in the passage outside, and fancied he distinguished his own name. In another moment the door opened, and the doctor looked in and beckoned to him to come out. "He wants to see you," he whispered to Gerard; "he is rather better just now, but I am afraid it will not be for long."

Tom was on guard outside Mr Montenello's

room, and softly opened the door as Gerard approached. The room was dimly lighted by a shaded lamp, and the only figure discernible at first was that of an old priest, who was sitting by the bedside. On seeing Gerard enter, he rose from his seat, and beckoned to him to take his place. He then glided noiselessly from the room, and Gerard was left alone in the chamber of death.

For a moment or two there was a dead silence. Gerard could now distinguish the outlines of the wounded man's head, as he lay propped up by pillows, with one hand restlessly wandering over the bed-clothes. He was on the point of saying something, when Mr Montenello spoke.

"Young man," he said, in a voice that thrilled Gerard through and through, "I have not many hours to live, and I have something of importance to say to you before I die."

Gerard tried to speak, but his tongue seemed to cleave to his lips. He could only bow assent, and Mr Montenello continued.

"You have spoken of Miss Florence Graham, and of having made her acquaintance in England. In fact," he went on, "I believe I am not wrong in supposing that you have some feelings of attachment for her?"

Gerard gave a start. Then she had spoken about him, and he was going to hear something about her after all. In spite of the overpowering sadness of the occasion, he was unable to repress a secret feeling of exultation. He murmured something in reply, scarcely knowing what he said, and Mr Montenello continued.

"I daresay," he said, speaking slowly and painfully, but yet with perfect distinctness, "you may have thought it strange that Miss Graham should be living at Netherdean with Mr Baldwin, and may have wondered who she was?"

Gerard again made an almost inaudible response. It was coming, after all, and he was now to hear the story of Florence's life.

"It is perhaps as well that you should

know this at once," resumed Mr Montenello. "Florence Graham is my daughter."

Somehow, this announcement did not take Gerard altogether by surprise. Although the idea had previously occurred to him, but had been dismissed as scarcely worth considering, the fact that it really was so did not produce any very great effect upon him, and it seemed to him, for the moment, to be merely a matter of detail. There was something more to come, he felt sure; and for this he waited with a painful, feverish anxiety.

"And yet," continued Mr Montenello, "her name is not really Graham. Neither is it Montenello; for, as I need hardly tell you, I am an Englishman, and have no foreign blood in me whatever.

"I am going to tell you something," the dying man went on, fixing his eyes steadfastly on Gerard, "that will probably astonish you very much, and will astonish a good many others still more."

Gerard felt a strange, unaccountable sort of shiver stealing over him. He said nothing, but clasped his hands nervously together,

trying to steel himself for what might be to come. There was a pause, during which he dared not look up, and then Mr Montenello resumed.

"You were probably rather surprised," he said, in slow, deliberate accents, "to find Joe Diddums here. For I believe you know Diddums? In fact, you have probably recognised me as the person who spoke to you one afternoon at Easthampton, and you may perhaps have connected Diddums' disappearance with me?"

Gerard nodded assent, wondering what this was going to lead to. He did not quite see the connection as yet.

"You know Easthampton pretty well, I daresay. And you are probably well acquainted with the Narborough family. In fact, I believe there is some sort of connection between you, is there not?"

"Yes," replied Gerard, in a voice that sounded to himself strangely hoarse and unnatural, "yes, I have known them all my life, more or less, and we are connected in a sort of way by marriage."

"Just so," replied Mr Montenello, slowly and calmly. "You are no doubt, then, well acquainted with the circumstances under which the present Lord Narborough's father succeeded to the title?

"You are aware," he went on, as if taking Gerard's assent for granted, "that the brother of the late Lord Narborough, uncle to the present peer, left England when quite a young man, and never came back again, having, it seems, been killed on board a river steamer in America?"

Gerard silently assented. It seemed to him that some strange revelation was impending, and he sat with parted lips and attention strained to the utmost.

"I suppose," continued the dying man, "that it was proved beyond a doubt that this Lord Narborough was killed in the way I have mentioned?"

There was a dead silence, during which Gerard could hear the beating of his own heart, and feel the perspiration rolling down his face. His brain seemed to reel; he could not think, and could only listen.

"And yet," continued Mr Montenello, more as if soliloquising than as if addressing another person, "we are all of us liable to be deceived sometimes. Supposing that there had been some mistake after all, and that this Lord Narborough had not really been killed, as was imagined?

"Supposing, for instance," he went on, "that he had made up his mind, for reasons of his own, to sacrifice his title and position in England, and live an obscure and unknown life in foreign countries, working as an ordinary mechanic, and trusting to his own exertions to procure a livelihood.

"Supposing, as after all is not altogether impossible, that he had come to the conconclusion that the only way to accomplish his purpose would be to altogether destroy his identity, and, regardless of the feelings of his family and friends, let it be imagined that he was dead, so that the title might pass to his brother, and he himself be forgotten.

"Supposing that by some means or other he had ascertained that he was being sought

out and tracked — a circumstance that in itself might be apt to increase his desire to disappear from the world—and that he had in consequence determined to baffle once for all those who were in search of him.

"Supposing that by a curious coincidence he had come across a young man who resembled him in every respect to a remarkable degree, and with whom he had become so intimate as to impart to him his real history; and that the idea had occurred to him to supply his friend with certain articles which, if found, would be recognised as his property, and then start him off upon a journey where he would be easily followed up to a certain point, after which he was to disappear altogether, in such a manner that it would be next to impossible to obtain any further trace of him.

"And supposing, last of all," continued Mr Montenello, in a voice that seemed to Gerard like that of a man speaking from the grave, "that Providence, which we do not always take sufficiently into account, had so willed it, and so assisted his design, that the man

whom he had employed to personate him should really have been killed, and that in consequence it should have gone forth to the world in an indisputable manner that Lord Narborough had met with a violent death; why then, there would be nothing to prevent him from carrying out his scheme to any extent. He might have assumed another name, and become an American citizen; he might have amassed money, and devoted himself to mercantile enterprise; or he might, perhaps, have turned his ideas to colonisation, and with a lingering love for English habits and customs, have endeavoured to found a sort of settlement in some comparatively unknown country, with the idea of opening up a new field for English emigrants. Some place like Venezuela, for instance"——

"My God!" ejaculated Gerard, sinking on his knees by the bedside, as the truth flashed across him with a vividness that was almost overpowering, "you don't mean to say"——

"Yes," replied Mr Montenello, in a calm voice, that contrasted strangely with Gerard's emotion; "I see you understand me. Yes,

young man, I am Francis Lord Narborough; and it is strange that it should be to you that I should first reveal my secret. But it is all for the best, perhaps. Ah! no wonder you are astonished; it is a curious story, certainly."

For Gerard, his face buried in his hands, was huddled up on his knees against the bed, completely overcome by the tremendous and unexpected revelation that had just been made to him, and seemed utterly incapable of speech or thought.

"You must collect yourself, my boy," said Mr Montenello, in a kind and sympathetic voice, that now began to tremble through weakness; "for I have something more to say to you before I die. Ah! you are better now. Just reach me that glass, for I am beginning to feel weaker, and if this bleeding comes on again, I am done for."

"Now," he continued, in a firmer voice, having drunk the contents of the glass that Gerard handed to him, "you know whom you are speaking to, and you will understand better what I have to say. By the way, I

presume you believe what I have told you, and do not imagine that I am romancing. Stop," as Gerard shook his head in deprecation of the idea. "It is just as well that you should see some proofs. Take those keys," pointing to a bunch on a table, "and unlock that despatch-box in the corner. It is the key with an ivory label. That's it. Now then, bring me one or two of those packets of letters, and I will show you who they are from."

Gerard obeyed his orders implicitly. It was an old-fashioned morocco despatch-box, with no name or initials outside. But he started as he opened it; for, among the neatly-arranged papers that lay at the top, he observed a packet of letters, the handwriting of which, although the ink was yellow with age, seemed strangely familiar to him. Yes, there could be no doubt about it; the form of the letters and the general style of writing was somewhat altered, but there were certain characteristics that were unmistakable. It was the handwriting of his own father.

"Let me see that packet," said Mr Mon-

tenello. "Ah! you ought to know that writing, for it is your father's. That is to say, I take it for granted that you are a son of Charles Courtenay,—he and I were great friends at that time, and you may possibly have heard him speak of me. You may read them, if you like; they relate to matters that are long dead and buried, but I daresay he might remember them yet. There are a few there from my mother, whom of course you cannot remember, and one or two from my sister Julia, who is still alive. The other papers will be of no interest to you, but they may be all useful in evidence."

Gerard turned over the papers with a feeling of wonder and awe. There were letters of all sorts, some addressed to "The Earl of Narborough," at various places, in England as well as abroad, and others without envelopes, and in all sorts of writing, now grown dim and indistinct with age. Glancing into the box, he could see various odds and ends, including an old banker's pass-book, an almanack of the year 1831, and the draft of the lease of a farm on the Easthampton

property. They all seemed to him like relics from the tomb, and he could hardly believe that the whole thing was not a dream.

"I daresay you will believe what I have told you," resumed Mr Montenello; "though, after all, it does not much matter, for there are plenty of proofs in Baldwin's keeping. And now, young man, my time is short, and there is another matter about which I wish to speak to you. I have told you that the young lady you know as Florence Graham is my daughter; and her real name therefore is, of course, Lady Florence Middleton; for though she never knew her mother," and here his voice trembled with weakness and emotion, "our marriage was perfectly legal and orthodox, and I have taken care that there shall be abundant proof of it. She has long since gone to her rest, and I shall soon join her. It would be too long a story now to tell you the history of my life, even if I had strength for it. But you must understand that from the first I had an idea of never returning to England as Lord Narborough. It was a foolish fancy of mine,

no doubt; and if circumstances had turned out otherwise, I might very likely have thought better of it. But when my poor friend was killed, and I found how readily the story of my own death was believed, I felt as if there were a sort of judgment in it, and I made a vow that I would never divulge my secret. It has often seemed to me very remarkable that the lawyers and others were so easily deceived. You may possibly have heard that one of the most important points was considered to be the finding of certain property of mine in his possession, and I have hinted to you how I managed this. It was perfectly simple and easy, and perhaps that was the very reason they never thought of it."

There was a pause. Mr Montenello seemed to grow weaker, and his voice sounded faint and indistinct. Gerard started up, and made a movement towards the door, with the idea of summoning the doctor. But the dying man, appearing to divine his intention, arrested him by a motion of his hand. "Stop," he said, in somewhat firmer accents,

"I have not finished all I have to say to you. Fill that glass again from the bottle, and give it to me. And now, attend, for I feel that my strength will not last much longer."

"I have suffered in various ways," he went on, "for what I have long since known to have been a foolish and ill-considered step; but my worst punishment has been as regards my child, and the necessity that has arisen for keeping her real name and position a secret. This has been a source of bitter distress to me, particularly during the last few years. I have seen her now and then, as you know, and it has been a terrible thing for me to think that I have been the means of depriving her of her name, her family, and everything that ought to have been hers. And on her account, therefore, I am thankful to die; for my death will at once clear everything up, and place her in her true position.

"And now, young man, what am I to say to you? Is it really and truly the case that you love my daughter?"

Gerard essayed to speak, but the words at first refused to come. "God knows I do," at last he half whispered, in husky accents; "I have loved her ever since I first spoke to her."

Mr Montenello looked at him long and earnestly, as if he would read his thoughts. "I don't know why I should not believe you," he said, at length, "and you appear to me to be speaking the truth. I need hardly say, without any disparagement to you, that if I could have had my choice, I might have looked elsewhere for a husband for her. But that has been impossible, and I must take the consequences of my own actions. It was of course only to be expected that she should fall in love with some one who would be a perfect stranger to me, and I have no one to blame but myself."

"But," interrupted Gerard, trembling with excitement, "I don't know—I mean, I'm not sure—do you really thinks she cares for me?"

"Why should you ask me?" returned Mr Montenello, with a tinge of bitterness in his

voice. "I have never dared reveal myself to her, and how should I claim her confidence? I have only been to her as a friend,—perhaps something more than an ordinary one,—and as a child she has talked to me freely about many things; but what right have I had to inquire into the secrets of her heart? No; all I have heard about you has been through Baldwin, whom she has naturally looked upon much more as a father than on me; and he appears, rightly or wrongly, to have formed an idea that she had—well, that she had been thinking about a young fellow of the name of Courtenay, who had come down there for a short time, and then suddenly disappeared."

Gerard felt a wild and indescribable joy taking possession of him. He said nothing, however, and Mr Montenello went on.

"It was a curious thing that I should meet you at Easthampton. I had not been near the place for many years, and was seized with a sudden desire to see it once more. It was strange, too, that I should come across Diddums, the only man who was in the least

likely to recognise me; but he knew me at once, poor old fellow, and I felt then that it was not safe to leave him there. It is strange, very strange, that I should again meet you in this way, and that you should be with me in my last hours. Stop," he continued, as Gerard was about to speak; "you must not suppose that I am going to assure you of my child's love, that would be going rather too far. No; I have no right to speak on her account, and you will have to make your own way with her. But I believe you to be an honourable young fellow, and indeed I can hardly think that the son of a man who was once one of my greatest friends could be otherwise. I know something about you, you see; I have heard of your being private secretary to Lord Ravendale, and of your being occasionally at Easthampton; but I certainly never expected to see you here.

"You will see my child after I am gone," he went on, after a pause, during which his breathing seemed to grow more painful and difficult. "You will tell her that I revealed myself to you; she will

soon know all about it, poor girl, for the moment my death is known to have taken place, Baldwin is to tell her everything. A telegraphic message will go to him, which is all ready prepared, and which will be found with my papers. Father Domenico will see to this. But there is something that I should like her to have direct from me," and he drew a small packet from under his pillow. "Now, young man, can I trust you to take this straight to her, and tell her that you brought it from her father's deathbed?"

Gerard trembled with mixed feelings of awe and delight as he took the precious packet in his hands. It was addressed to "The Lady Florence Middleton," and it seemed to him like a passport or sacred credential to her whom he loved best in the world.

"You can trust me, indeed you can!" he exclaimed. "And you will not forbid me to—to try and win her love?"

But the dying man did not answer. He fixed his eyes on Gerard with a glassy stare,

and his lips moved as if to speak, but no sound issued from them, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. With a cry of horror, Gerard sprang to the door, and called to the doctor and the others outside to come in. They raised his head, and the doctor forced some restorative into his mouth. "His pulse is nearly gone," he muttered; "the end cannot be far off." And the melancholy party grouped themselves around to await the closing scene.

But the end was not to be just yet. By degrees a slight flush of colour returned to the pale cheeks, and the pulse grew a little stronger. He muttered some words indistinctly, and his eyes wandered as if in search of some one. Gerard was about to speak to him, but the doctor stopped him. "You must leave him alone," he whispered; "I fear there is no hope; but the only shadow of a chance is in his being perfectly quiet." So Gerard sat down near the head of the bed, out of sight of the dying man, and abandoned himself to his own reflections.

So the hours wore on. The stillness of the tropical night was only broken by the subdued and indistinct murmurings of the crowd outside, or by an occasional movement in the chamber of death. Now and then the door would be gently opened, and one of the mourners would steal out, to be replaced by some other, anxious for a look at their beloved master. One figure alone retained its position at the foot of the bed, without moving—an old man, sitting crouched on a low stool, his face buried in his hands, and his whole appearance indicative of the deepest grief. It was old Diddums, who had crept into the room when Gerard called the doctor, and had never left it since. Now and then he would slowly raise his head, and look up in a scared and distracted manner, and then with a low moan resume his former attitude.

It was now about half-past three. Gerard, overcome by excitement and fatigue, was dozing on one side of the bed, and the old priest, who had just relieved the doctor, was on the other. Suddenly, and as if by some

instinct, he awoke with a start, and bent over the bed. Mr Montenello's eyes were wide open, and a change had come over his face. His eyes met Gerard's, and he smiled, with lips parted, as if about to speak. Gerard took his hand, which was lying outside the bed-clothes, and the dying man's fingers closed with a gentle pressure upon his. Then his eyes wandered away in the direction of the window, and a strange, unearthly look of peace and happiness came over his face, as if he saw something that gave him ineffable pleasure. Gerard instinctively followed his gaze. The day was beginning to dawn, and a faint streak of light was just visible in the horizon. A light breeze had sprung up, and was whispering softly in the creepers and trellis-work of the verandah outside—a weird, mysterious sighing, the gentle requiem of a departing soul. A bright smile illumined the features of the dying man, and his gaze was earnestly riveted in the direction of the window. "Isidora, Isidora mia," he murmured, in scarcely audible accents. But it was a last effort. The

straining eyes grew dimmer and dimmer, till it was apparent that the sight had departed from them; Gerard felt the pressure on his hand slowly relax; and as the morning star rose, solemnly, sweetly, over the boundless *llanos*, there was a last, long-drawn sigh, and the heavy head sank down to rest.

It was all over. The world-worn bark had at last passed into the harbour, and the weary spirit had returned to God who gave it.

Gerard fell on his knees by the bedside, and buried his face in his hands. His head swam round, his brain reeled, and he fell into a kind of swoon. How long he knelt there he knew not; but he was roused by a gentle touch on his shoulder, and looking up, he perceived that he was surrounded by a crowd of faces, among which was that of the old priest, who was bending over him with a look of intense kindness and sympathy. "He is taken from us, my son," he whispered in French, in grave and gentle accents; "God's will be done. Let us pray

for his soul's repose." And kneeling down, he offered up a solemn prayer for the dead. "And now," he said, as he rose from his knees, "we must leave him for the present;" and motioning to the others to follow him, he led Gerard out of the room.

They passed slowly through the hall, crowded with anxious and sorrowing figures, and went out on to the steps, where a strange sight presented itself. A swarm of swarthy, upturned faces, just discernible in the cold dawn, and lighted up here and there by torches; groups of women and even young children sitting crouched and huddled up in corners; altogether some three or four hundred souls, the entire population, in fact, of the little settlement, who had been patiently waiting during the weary hours of the night, hoping against hope for more favourable news. It was a weird and picturesque scene, and well worthy of a painter. As the familiar form of the *padre* appeared at the door, there was a murmur and rustle of expectation; but his face told the tale only too plainly; and as he slowly raised his

hand and made the sign of the cross, there rose up a cry of sorrow that went to Gerard's very heart. It was a fitting and touching tribute to the memory of him who was gone, a suitable closing scene to a strange and melancholy life.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HOME AGAIN.

How Gerard got back to San Fernando he never quite knew. He had indistinct recollections of a conference with Father Domenico, whom he found, to his surprise, to be well acquainted with Mr Montenello's real history, including the circumstances connected with his marriage, at which time, it appeared, he had become a convert to the Roman Catholic religion. He resolved, therefore, to confide to him the story of his attachment to Florence, urging him, at the same time, not to send off the telegraphic message that had been referred to, but to let him be the bearer of the sad intelligence to Florence in person. The old priest, who showed much interest in Gerard's story, consented, after some hesitation, to do as he desired, and promised to take no steps in the matter until he should hear from him

after his arrival in England. Then came a vision of a hurried ride, in company with Tom Lockyer, to Puerto Carrero, and of the sight of the Government steamer in the bay, the captain of which was manifesting his impatience by the exhibition of various unintelligible signals with flags and other maritime devices, and by frantic blasts from his steam-whistle. It was late in the evening by the time he got on board, and the excitement of the little captain, who had been lying-to for four hours or more, and whose temper had not been thereby improved, was decidedly impressive. But his expostulations and reproaches were quite lost upon Gerard, who climbed mechanically on board, like a man in a dream, and exhibited no emotion or sense of shame whatever. He sank down upon a seat on deck, his head resting on his hand, where he remained for some time after the steamer had got out of sight of Puerto Carrero, absorbed in his own thoughts, and apparently altogether unconscious of the curious glances that were cast at him, or the comments excited by his haggard and scared appearance. As night

came on, he obeyed the captain's invitation to go below, and excusing himself from appearing at supper on the plea of feeling unwell, lay down in his berth to rest. But, wearied as he was, sleep was for a long time out of the question; and when at last he dropped off into a broken and troubled state of semi-consciousness, he was haunted by an ever-present vision of the solemn scene through which he had passed, and the calm, pale face of Florence's father—for he could at present think of him in no other way—was continually before his eyes. It was only on his return to Government House that he was able to rouse himself a little and collect his thoughts for what was before him. The change back to the bustle and hurry of civilisation was in itself a relief to him, and helped to calm his mind. His first step was to seek an interview with the Governor, and communicate to him, under promise of secrecy, the startling news of Mr Montenello's death, and of his identity with the long-forgotten Lord Narborough. But he could not quite bring himself to reveal all

that had passed, and accounted for his being in possession of the secret by its having accidentally transpired that he was a distant connection of the Narborough family.

Sir Henry was deeply interested in Gerard's recital, and much touched by the strange story of Mr Montenello's life. "You have played a part in a most extraordinary romance," he said, as they parted next day; "nothing I ever read in fiction beats this. But it quite carries out my theory; for, as I told you, I always felt sure there was some mystery about him, and that he was not what he professed to be. I shall look out anxiously for an account of the case in the papers, for of course it will all come out now; and in the meantime you can trust to us to keep it dark. Very glad to have made your acquaintance, and I hope we shall meet again some day. You must give a good account of us here at home if they ask you any questions; and don't drop that precious charter overboard, or Mr Mills will certainly commit suicide, and the world will come to an end. Good-bye, and good luck to you."

"That's a nice, gentlemanlike young fellow," observed Sir Henry to his aide-de-camp, as they stood together on the pier watching the rapidly-receding steamer; "but, somehow or other, I fancy he hasn't told us quite everything. He must have found out something more about this man, or he would never have been in such a strange scared state as he seems to be now. I shouldn't be at all surprised if there were a young lady mixed up with it somehow. 'Cherchez la femme,' eh? Anyhow, I'm pretty sure there's something more behind. It's a strange story anyway, and I shall be very curious to hear the end of it."

We will pass over the details of Gerard's return voyage to England in company with his precious charter. It was perhaps just as well for him, under the circumstances, that he came in for a spell of unusually rough and disagreeable weather, which, as he was anything but a good sailor, necessitated his keeping his berth for the greater part of the first ten days; and his thoughts being thereby concentrated on his own personal

discomfort, were prevented from dwelling upon the strange and terrible experience through which he had just passed. Had it not been for the precious letter, which he fondly hoped might be the means of bringing him nearer to Florence, and the superscription of which he read and re-read a dozen times a day, the whole thing would have seemed to him a sort of nightmare. About the tenth day of the voyage he staggered on deck, having at last got over his sea-sickness, but feeling as if all his strength had gone from him, and scarcely capable of doing more than sit in a lounging chair and think. But even then he could hardly collect his thoughts, and found it impossible to prevent his mind from wandering off to all sorts of trivial and frivolous objects. There were, as it happened, but few passengers of any kind, and certainly none with whom he had any desire to associate; and having, moreover, only appeared when the voyage was half over, he was naturally out of the little coteries that had already been formed, and found himself almost entirely isolated, a position which, in his

present state of mind, was far from being unacceptable. The remainder of the voyage was fine; and as they got nearer home, he felt himself gradually steadying down, and feeling more composed both in mind and body. For the last two or three days, indeed, he quite enjoyed being at sea; and, much as he longed to see Florence again, and speak to her as he now felt he might, there was a certain undefinable sense of shrinking from the coming back once more into the world, and the severing of the last link that seemed to connect him with the Venezuelan *hacienda* and its strange story. It was with curiously mixed feelings, therefore, that he encountered the first well-known signs of proximity to old England; and his last night on board was passed in a broken and feverish slumber. Towards morning, however, he at last dropped into a sound and dreamless sleep, from which he was aroused by an unwonted trampling overhead, the blowing of steam whistles, shouting of orders, and other demonstrations associated with the approach to port; and, sitting up in his berth, he became conscious

of that gentle, gliding motion which brings such unspeakable relief to sea-sick voyagers, and betokens the entry into smooth water. He started up, feeling that the time had come for him to collect all his energies; and, going on deck, found that they were already in the Southampton Water. In another hour or two they were alongside the pier.

Gerard's first object was to get to the General Enquiry Office without a moment's delay, and then be free to go in search of Florence. In his capacity of a special Government messenger, he was passed on shore at once without undergoing the ordeal of the custom-house, and so contrived to catch the special train that conveyed the mails to London. He had by no means elaborated his plan of action, and was anxiously revolving in his mind how he should break the news to Florence, when, upon the train drawing up at Basingstoke, his eye was caught by something in the advertisement of a weekly "society" paper. The train ran past the spot; but the moment it stopped, Gerard jumped out, and hurried back to look at the placard that had

attracted his attention. He had not been mistaken; between the headings of "Naughty Stories, No. 65," and an article on "Political Mashers," there appeared in large type, "The Narborough Romance!"

Gerard's first feeling was one of disappointment, not unmixed with anger. He had looked upon the fact of his being the only possessor of the secret, with the exception of those still on the spot, as an important point in his favour in his further relations with Florence, and as likely to form a bond of union between them that must materially advance his cause; and now she would have heard it all, and he would appear in a merely secondary character. "That old priest has gone and sent the telegram after all," he thought; and he execrated him in his heart for not having kept his promise. The paper was nearly a week old, and there was not a copy left at the bookstall. Gerard hurriedly questioned the man in charge, but he could gather nothing from him, except that about ten days before the papers had been full of the case, and that he fancied it was a sort of

Tichborne affair over again. But the man was busy serving customers, and could give him no attention; and the train starting again immediately, Gerard was obliged to resume his journey without being any wiser, and altogether in a most unsatisfactory frame of mind.

Before arriving in London, however, he had time to collect his thoughts; and after some reflection he decided that the best thing he could do would be to go straight to his club, where he could look up the papers, and see what really had transpired. It was still early in the day, and there would be no one at the General Enquiry Office for another hour at least. On arriving in London, therefore, he drove, charter, luggage, and all, to the St George's Club, where he was received by the hall porter as if he had been there the day before. Scarcely glancing at a budget of letters that were handed to him, he made his way to the morning room, at that time almost empty, and pounced upon the last week's *Scandal.*

With what trembling excitement Gerard

turned to and devoured the article in question may readily be imagined; but the more he read, the more puzzled he became. It was evident that the identity of Mr Montenello with the former Lord Narborough had been established, or, at any rate, suggested; but no reference was made to the fact of his being dead. On the contrary, much stress was laid upon the awkward position likely to be occupied by the present peer; and speculations were indulged in as to whether, supposing the rightful heir chose to remain abroad and relinquish all claims to the family possessions, they could legally be enjoyed by his nephew. "The position," continued the writer, "would have presented complications of a still more remarkable nature if Lord Narborough, as we must now call the eccentric recluse of Venezuela, had any heirs male. But we understand that the only issue of the marriage has been a girl, who has been brought up under an assumed name, and under the charge of the Mr Baldwin who has figured so prominently in this strange story; and we may presume that,

whatever else may be decided upon, steps will be forthwith taken by the Narborough family to have her position duly recognised."

It was perfectly clear, therefore, that the writer knew nothing of Mr Montenello's death; and this made the whole thing quite incomprehensible. "They can't have heard anything from old Domenico, after all," he thought; "but what the devil can old Baldwin have been doing?" There was no time, however, at the moment, for pursuing the subject further; for his first duty was to deliver the precious charter, the object and cause of the mission that had ended in such a strange and unlooked-for adventure. So, reluctantly relinquishing the thumbed and club-worn copy of *Scandal*, he re-entered his cab, which he had left at the door, and drove off to the General Enquiry Office.

Here he was greeted with much consideration and respect by the messengers, as one who had successfully braved the perils of the deep in the interests of the office, and welcomed almost effusively by the great Mr

Mills. For once that eminent public servant was quite overcome, and tears actually stood in his eyes as he grasped the precious document, the thought of which had occupied his sleeping and waking hours for the last two months or more. "You have done very well, Courtenay," he said, "and some day you will be glad to think that you have been employed in this matter. Some people think nothing of an affair of this sort," he continued, calling to mind the shocking levity displayed by the Vice-President when the charter was first found to be missing, "but you may depend upon it that in these days one can't be too careful; and there is no saying what might not have happened if we could not have produced the charter at the proper time. However, all's well that ends well, and the question won't come before the House for another three weeks, they say; so we're all safe now. Your chief will be here this afternoon, and will be glad to see you, no doubt. Good-bye, then, for the present; you see I am rather busy just now."

So Gerard, feeling a certain sense of relief in having got rid of his charge, repaired to his own room, where he found the office-keeper lighting the fire, and generally fussing about. "Didn't know when to expect you, sir," he said, "or I would have had your room ready. His lordship has been up for nearly a week, sir; will be glad to have you back again, I should think, sir. He said he should be here about three o'clock, or perhaps a little earlier."

Acting on this information, Gerard resolved to await his chief's arrival before doing anything further. He had from the first made up his mind to confide entirely in him, feeling that he could rely upon his sympathy and counsel. He would, moreover, be certain to have heard all about the affair, and would be able to tell him in a few words exactly what had happened. So he ordered some luncheon, and at the same time requested his friend the office-keeper to bring him the files of the *Times* for the last fortnight. In the meantime he proceeded to open a pile of letters that had accumulated on his table,

and to generally resume occupation of his room.

It is a curious feeling, that of coming back to the quiet avocations of everyday life after some unusually exciting interlude, especially if the time, or a portion of it, has been spent in a foreign country. After the first few moments, everything seems just as if we had never been away, and half an hour generally suffices for us to drop insensibly into our long-accustomed habits. There is something peculiarly impressive, almost amounting to solemnity, about the aspect of a room that has been shut up during our absence; and the mute appearance of welcome about even inanimate objects has for certain temperaments a peculiar charm, suggesting the well-worn reflection that after all there is no place like home. Gerard, as he looked round his official room, could hardly believe it possible that since he was last there he had been on a voyage to the tropics, and had passed through such a strange experience. The housemaids of the General Enquiry Office were not given to any superfluous "tidying," and it certainly could

not be charged against them that they were in the habit of unnecessarily disturbing books and papers. Everything was just as he had left it; here a pile of blue-books that he had been too lazy to clear away, there some old official correspondence that he had got up for some question in the House, and had put on one side, thinking it might be required again; a book of travels in the West Indies, which he had sent for from the office library to see what sort of a place San Fernando was, still lay on his table; and in the blotting-book was a sheet of paper with some rough memoranda concerning his expedition. "By Jove," he thought, "what strange things have happened since I was here last!" And he was obliged to again have recourse to his precious letter, to satisfy himself that even now it was not all a dream.

Unfortunately, Gerard's intention to examine the newspapers in order to get at the truth of the Narborough story was for the moment frustrated; for his room was speedily invaded by one member of the office after another, some curious to hear his adventures

in connection with the recovered charter, and others with papers, etc., for his chief. It was a question upon which he naturally felt shy of speaking, except to a very intimate friend; and, at the time, there happened to be no one actually in the office whom he could class in this category. So for the next three-quarters of an hour he was occupied in desultory conversation; and he had hardly time to glance at one or two of the newspapers that had been brought him before he heard the door open and shut in the next room, and in another moment the office-keeper popped in his head and informed him that Lord Ravendale had arrived.

Under such circumstances Gerard was bound to report himself at once to his chief, without waiting for a summons; so, after allowing a minute or two to elapse, he passed through the double doors connecting his own room with Lord Ravendale's, and presented himself before that nobleman, who received him with open arms.

"Why, Gerard, my boy!" he exclaimed, "I had no idea you were back. Delighted to see

you again ; come and let's hear what you have been doing."

Gerard recounted his general proceedings as succinctly as possible, up to the time of his going over to Venezuela. At the mention of this country, Lord Ravendale pricked up his ears. "Venezuela, by Jove!" he exclaimed, "why, that's where they say this fellow Narborough lives. By the way, I suppose you've heard about this, as the Narboroughs are friends of yours, are they not? Regular sort of Tichborne case, it seems, only the claimant doesn't want to come forward."

"Yes, I have heard something about it," replied Gerard, endeavouring to speak in an unconcerned tone, "but I haven't heard the whole story yet, for I only saw something about it in the papers as I came up this morning."

"Ah, well," returned Lord Ravendale, "it's an extraordinary story. It seems that some old fellow has died suddenly down in Wealdshire, and when they came to look into his papers, they found a whole lot of documents,

from which it appears that the uncle of the present Narborough, who was supposed to have been killed years and years ago, is still alive, and living somewhere in Venezuela, and that his daughter has been brought up by this old boy under an assumed name. It sounds rather a fishy story, certainly, but it's being looked into, and they seem to think it's about true."

A sudden light broke in upon Gerard. The old priest had not broken his word after all, but what an extraordinary chance had revealed the truth! Old Baldwin dead, and Florence alone! The thought of this was too much for him, and he resolved to unburthen himself of his secret at once.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I should like very much to tell you something, and ask your advice about it."

"My dear boy," replied his chief, taking him by the shoulder with a friendly squeeze, "of course you know I'd always do anything I could to help you. What is it? Not got into a mess with some girl out there, or anything of that sort, eh?"

"No; it's not that, exactly," replied Gerard, smiling in spite of himself; "but a most extraordinary thing has happened to me out there." And as briefly as possible he told his strange story.

Lord Ravendale listened with the most undisguised astonishment. "Well, Gerard, my boy," he said at length, "this beats anything I ever heard. Why, it's like a thing on the stage, or a sensation novel. Are you sure it's real business, now, and that you saw the real man?"

"Yes," replied Gerard, sadly, as his mind reverted to that strange death-bed scene; "I don't think there can be any mistake about it. Here is a letter he gave me, which I am going to take to her at once—if you don't mind," he added, remembering that he was back again on duty.

Lord Ravendale took the letter in his hand, and stared at the superscription with a bewildered expression. "Well, there seems no doubt about it, so far," at length he said. "My dear boy," turning to Gerard with a friendly smile, "of course you must

go at once, and the sooner the better. Don't think about the office; for the matter of that, I can get on well enough alone for a bit longer, and you know it won't do to lose time at this sort of game, eh? By Jove, I've fancied once or twice that you had got something of the kind on hand. All right then," checking Gerard's attempted thanks; I wish you good luck with all my heart, and if there's anything I can do to help you in any way, you know you've only got to ask me."

So, about half-past seven the same evening, Gerard found himself once more on the platform at Shawfield station. He had allowed himself a couple of hours, after parting with his chief, to write a few letters and set his affairs in order, and had just caught the 5.30 train from Victoria. It was with a beating heart that he alighted and gave his things to a porter, who, after staring at him for a moment, saluted him with a touch of his cap as an old acquaintance, from whom he had more than once received a tip during the previous winter.

"Not been down here this year, sir?" he remarked; "been some good hunting, they tell me. I suppose you'll be going to the Swan?"

"Yes," replied Gerard. "That's to say, I want my things taken up there; but, first of all, I want a fly to take me over to Netherdean."

"Netherdean, sir?" repeated the man, looking a little surprised. "All right, sir, I'll get one from the Station Hotel. I suppose you know, sir," with another touch of his cap, "that there ain't no one there now?"

"No one there!" repeated Gerard, anxiously; "how do you mean?"

"Why, you see, sir, arter the old gentleman died, there were some parties come down, and there were an old lady come too, and she stopped till arter the funeral, and she went away and took Miss Graham—the young lady, you know, sir—along with her; and now the house is all shut up, they tell me."

"The deuce it is!" muttered Gerard, in some perturbation. "How long is it since they went?"

"'Bout a fortnight ago, I think, sir. Let's see, this is Tuesday; yes, it were a fortnight to-morrow, sure enough;—went off by the two o'clock train, they did, cos I saw 'em off myself."

"Do you know where they went to?" inquired Gerard, with a keen sense of chagrin and disappointment. He had made certain of seeing Florence that evening, and now all hope of that, at any rate, was at an end.

"No, sir, I can't say I do," replied the man; "but I think the stationmaster has the address, as there were some things to be sent on. You wait here a moment, sir, and I'll run across and ask him."

In a couple of minutes the porter was back, with a memorandum written on a sheet of notepaper. Gerard's heart beat quickly as he recognised Florence's writing. It was merely to the effect that Miss Graham's address until further notice was—

"Care of Mrs Ashton,
Scratby Hall,
Skipworth Station,
North-Eastern Railway."

Gerard was not long in making up his mind.

"When is there a train back to London?" he enquired of the porter.

"Nothing till 9.30, sir. There was one a quarter of an hour before your train came in; but there's nothing more to-night till the 9.30."

"Very well, then," said Gerard, "I'll go up by that, if you will look after my things till then; and I'll go up and get something to eat at the Swan."

It was a comfort to have seen even her handwriting; and Gerard felt that, after all, he was on her track, and could only be a day's journey or so from her. So he resigned himself to the two hours' wait for the up-train, resolved to go down to Skipworth station, wherever that might be, by the first train in the morning. It was curious to be back once more at Shawfield; and as he walked slowly up to the Swan and passed all the well-remembered spots, he thought of that night when he had come back from the ball at Crowhurst with a feeling of such blank despair, and of the strange things that had happened since. Well, after all, he was in a better position

now than then, and it was a source of trembling exultation to him to think that it was through him alone that she must hear of the concluding scene in the strange secret of her life. And for the hundredth time he pulled out his precious letter and gazed at the address under a lamp-post, to make sure that even now it was not all a dream.

CHAPTER XL.

SCRATBY HALL.

Gerard had a slow and tedious journey back to London, arriving at Victoria shortly before midnight. He had procured a Bradshaw at Shawfield, and had ascertained that Skipworth was a little station on a branch line starting from Newcastle, and that by leaving King's Cross by the "Flying Scotchman" at ten in the morning, he could be there about six o'clock in the evening. He had decided not to return to his lodgings, where he would not be expected, and accordingly engaged a room at the Grosvenor Hotel. He was up early next morning, fearful of missing the train; and after the usual rapid and easy journey by what is unquestionably the finest train service in the world, found himself at Newcastle at four o'clock in the afternoon. He had still nearly two hours' journey

before him, in a slow, stopping train, with half-an-hour's wait at another junction; but he now felt that he really was drawing near to Florence; and in fact, when there remained only two or three little wayside stations before Skipworth, he began to experience a strange sort of nervousness, and a sense of misgiving, almost amounting to a shrinking from the approaching interview. What if, after all, there should have been a mistake, and she should have never seriously thought about him at all; or if, as was only too probable during all this time, she had met some one else to supplant him in her affections, if indeed he had ever had any place there? His much-relied-on letter and all that had passed would then be of no avail, and he would only have the melancholy satisfaction of as it were helping to clear the way for a rival. So, as one queer-named station after another was reached and passed, he became more and more nervous and uncomfortable, until, when at last the train drew up at the bleak little platform, and a stentorian-voiced porter announced, in a strong north-country

accent, that this was no other than Skipworth, he almost wished himself anywhere else. However, there he was, and he must go through with it now. So, having given up his ticket, and been well stared at as a stranger, he inquired of the stationmaster how far it was to Scratby Hall, and what would be his best means of getting there.

Scratby Hall, it appeared, was six miles off, up towards the hills. There was no available vehicle at hand; "but," added the stationmaster, "you can get a machine at the Collingwood Arms, a mile up the road; and here's Mr Copeland," addressing a jolly-looking farmer who had been the only other passenger for Skipworth, "has got his dog-cart here, and I daresay he'll give you a lift as far as that, as it's all on his road home."

The individual thus indicated expressed his willingness to accommodate the gentleman, and in another minute Gerard was seated by his side and jogging along the road to the Collingwood Arms. Mr Copeland was not much of a conversationalist; or rather, he was per-

fectly capable of expressing himself volubly in his own dialect, but as this was almost unintelligible to Gerard, he could only answer somewhat at random, and the conversation had a tendency, therefore, to be rather one-sided. Gerard essayed a question as to Scratby Hall and its inmates, which elicited a torrent of information that to any one who understood the language would doubtless have been most interesting, but which was almost entirely lost upon our hero. He was just able to gather, however, that Mrs Ashton was a lady of whom Mr Copeland entirely approved, and that Scratby Hall was "a bonny place." They were soon at the Collingwood Arms, an old-fashioned posting-house standing by itself at a cross-roads, where it was of course incumbent upon Mr Copeland to alight and have a glass of whisky, in which he insisted upon Gerard joining him, after which, with a hearty squeeze of the hand, he reascended his dog-cart and went on his way.

In another ten minutes Gerard was on the road again, this time in a four-wheeled "machine" from the inn, with only five

miles, as the driver was compelled to admit, between himself and Scratby Hall. The moon had now risen, and disclosed a pretty, broken country, the low ground thickly wooded, and the higher lands gradually stretching away to the distant hills. It was altogether a new country to Gerard; the keen air was fresh and invigorating after his long journey in the train, and his spirits insensibly began to rise. After all, the chances seemed in his favour, and it was impossible to deny that, coming as he did straight from her father's death-bed, there must necessarily be a sort of link between them to which no one else could aspire.

His new charioteer was a quiet, civil-spoken man, whose dialect was far more intelligible than the worthy Mr Copeland's. He seemed a shrewd, observant sort of fellow, as is often the case with men of his calling; and Gerard was surprised to find that he not only knew all about Mrs Ashton and her belongings, but was well acquainted with the fact that a young lady was staying at the Hall who had been recently discovered to be a daughter

of the Earl of Narborough who was supposed to have been killed many years ago. "It's just a varra strange story," he observed, with a flourish of his whip, "to think that a nobleman like him should go and leave his estates, and his family, and such like, just to work like a mechanic. Ar'm thinking, too, that it's no just right for a man, when he's born into that state o' life, for to go and leave all his duties behind him, just for a mere fancy like. Aweel, it's no for the likes o' me to be finding fault with him; and maybe he'll come home now, when he hears it's all found out, though ar'm thinking it will be varra awkward for the young Earl gin he does."

Gerard almost shuddered at the man's words. "No," he said, "I don't think he'll ever come back again." And he thought of that death-bed far away, and that sad day-break over the *llanos;* and his mind grew troubled and distressed at the thought that he had got to break it all to Florence. But he had not much time for further meditation at the moment; for a sharp turn of the road

brought them in view of what seemed in the moonlight to be an extensive park or mass of woodland; and his charioteer pulling up at a neat little lodge, almost concealed in a cluster of Scotch firs, communicated to him the fact that they had arrived at Scratby Hall.

A summons from the driver brought a pretty-looking girl to open the gate, who stared after the stranger in the dog-cart with some curiosity. They drove along for about a quarter of a mile through thick fir plantations, the moonbeams casting a chequered light on the sandy carriage-drive. Suddenly they emerged upon an open, park-like space, where a small sheet of water shone out brightly against a thick belt of spruces. On the opposite side, the ground rose considerably; and among some fine old trees could be discerned the dark walls of a house, with here and there a twinkling light in the upper windows. Crossing a low stone bridge over a little stream that ran out of the lake, they drove up a short avenue, and in another minute or two pulled up at the door of a substantial, well-built house, with the rough-cast exterior so

common among old houses in the north of England.

Gerard got down and rang the bell. Somehow or other, now that the moment had actually arrived, and he was once more about to be brought face to face with his love, his nervousness and anxiety seemed suddenly to depart, and a strange calmness took possession of him. He looked at his watch; it was just seven. "By Jove," he thought, "they will probably be just going to dinner; how very awkward! Don't take my bag down," he said quietly to the driver, "but when I go in, just wait here for orders. I may perhaps be going back in half an hour, or I may possibly stop here for the night."

Footsteps were heard approaching inside. There was a sound of unbolting and unlocking, and an elderly domestic, of the confidential, old-family-servant type, the same, in fact, who has already been introduced to the reader in London, half opened the door and peeped suspiciously out. Seeing a gentleman standing on the doorstep, and a vehicle in the background, he vouchsafed to open the door

to its full extent, and inclined his head towards Gerard in an inquiring manner, as if to ask what on earth he wanted there at that time in the evening.

"Can I see Mrs Ashton for a moment?" asked Gerard, with a calmness that surprised himself. "On some important business," he explained; "I have just come from London on purpose."

The old man looked from Gerard to the driver in a puzzled and doubtful manner. "Mrs Ashton has gone to dress," he said, pulling out a rotund silver watch. "They dine at half-past seven, and I don't think you can see her now. Perhaps you had better come in, sir," he continued, noting a movement of impatience on Gerard's part, "and I'll speak to her maid. Walk in, sir, and sit down." And he ushered Gerard into a snug, carpeted hall, comfortably furnished, with a large open fire-place in which a wood-fire was smouldering away, and with sundry arm-chairs and small tables, &c. scattered about in such a manner as to show that it was a good deal made use of as a sitting-room.

"If you will wait here a moment," continued Mr Gregson, becoming more gracious as he saw that Gerard was in earnest, and possibly divining that the visit might have something to do with the strange story respecting Lady Florence, as they now called her, which had furnished him and his fellow-servants with such a delightful and inexhaustible fund of gossip for the last fortnight, "I will send your message to Mrs Ashton." And he went out, leaving Gerard alone.

It is curious how, when our senses are most highly strung, and what at the time we may perhaps consider our life's happiness may be trembling in the balance, our attention will often be distracted by the most trivial incidents, and we may find ourselves taking a deep interest in matters which at other times it would never have occurred to us to notice. Gerard sat still for a few minutes, listening to the slow ticking of an old-fashioned clock in the corner, and the dropping of the wood-ashes on the hearth. But the silence made him restless, and he got up and began to wander about the hall. He knew perfectly

well that he was in the same house with Florence, and that he might at any moment be brought face to face with her; but, somehow, he could not bring himself to think seriously about it, or to arrange his ideas in a manner at all befitting the importance of the occasion. He felt rather as if he had come to make a chance call in a strange house, and his principal cause of anxiety was his own bad management in having arrived just at dinner-time. In the meantime, Florence, except as an abstract idea, seemed to pass almost entirely out of his mind; and he found himself taking far more interest in the various objects scattered about the room. A quaint old picture of fox-hunting, with that peculiarly wooden type of horse and hound so characteristic of the sporting artist of the last century, first attracted his attention, and made him smile. Then he became much interested in a small French clock on the mantelpiece, with a pendulum consisting of a fat little cherub in a swing; and then his eyes wandered off to a large book-shelf in a corner, and he fell to scrutinising the titles of

Mrs Ashton's favourite authors. He had just discovered an old edition of Colonel Hawker's "Instructions to Sportsmen," and was about to take it down to see if it corresponded with his own, when he heard the rustle of silk outside, and the door gently opening, he found himself confronted by an elderly lady in deep mourning, whom we have already introduced to our readers as Mr Baldwin's sister, Mrs Ashton.

Gerard at once returned to his senses and to the reality of his position. He felt rather as if he had been detected in a misdemeanour, and advanced somewhat awkwardly to meet Mrs Ashton. "I must apologise," he began, "for calling on you at this hour, especially as I am altogether a stranger to you. But the fact is, I am very anxious to see Miss Graham—that is to say, Lady Florence—on a matter of great importance; and hearing she was here, I came down at once; but I am very sorry to have arrived at such an awkward time."

Gerard's embarrassment was not lost upon

Mrs Ashton, who, on her part, was quite equal to the occasion. "Oh, pray, don't apologise," she replied, with a dignified and rather stiff little bow. "I am very glad to see you, and I hope you will stop to dinner anyhow. I think I have heard your name before, Mr Courtenay. You met Lady Florence" (with an emphasis on the new title) "at my poor brother's, I believe?"

Gerard bowed assent. "I was so grieved and shocked," he went on, "to hear this sad news about Mr Baldwin. I feel that I ought not to have intruded upon you at such a time as this, but I have something of the greatest importance to say to Lady Florence, if I may be allowed to see her."

Mrs Ashton looked at him curiously. "Oh, certainly," she replied, with a slight degree of stiffness; "of course you can see her if you wish. Might I ask—you see she is, as it were, under my charge just now—if you have any objection to letting me know what it is you wish to say to her?"

Gerard hesitated. He did not quite like

to take the old lady into his confidence; and it was clear that nothing was known as yet of Mr Montenello's death. No; that must be told first of all to Florence, and no other. Still, he could not entirely conceal his errand from Mrs Ashton, who had unmistakably a certain right to question him.

"Mrs Ashton," he replied, "I cannot tell you everything at this moment, for I have something to say that can only be told to Lady Florence herself. But I may tell you this much, that I have just come from Venezuela, where I have seen Mr ——, Lady Florence's father; and I have a letter from him which he charged me to deliver into her own hands."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs Ashton, startled out of her dignity by Gerard's announcement, and somewhat alarmed by his manifest agitation, "you don't say so! Dear me, how very strange! And is he coming back then? Dear, dear, what will happen, I wonder? But how did you come

to see him, Mr Courtenay; surely you could not have known who he was?"

"No, it was a mere accident," replied Gerard. "Mrs Ashton," he continued, becoming more collected himself as the old lady lost her self-possession, "will you let me see Lady Florence at once? I cannot tell you anything more till I have seen her, and then I will tell you everything; but I must see her first."

"Very well," returned Mrs Ashton in a somewhat trembling voice, overcome by her visitor's earnestness of manner, "you shall see her at once; but please be careful what you say to her, Mr Courtenay, for she is in a very nervous and agitated state, poor child, and no wonder. Come this way, if you please."

Gerard followed his hostess along a passage to a door draped with a heavy crimson *portière*, which opened into a pretty little sitting-room or boudoir. There was a reading-lamp on a table by the fire, and some feminine work lay scattered about; and the room,

though deserted for the moment, bore unmistakable though indescribable signs of recent occupation. "Wait here a moment, Mr Courtenay," said Mrs Ashton, "and I will send her to you." And he was once more left alone.

CHAPTER XLI.

"I HAVE SEEN YOUR FATHER."

Gerard never knew how long he was left alone in that little room. It could not have been very many minutes; but it might have been an hour, for all he knew. Leaning on the velvet-covered mantelpiece, and staring vacantly at the reflection of his own somewhat haggard-looking face in the glass, the events of his life during the last two years seemed to come back to him with a peculiarly vivid effect. His first sight of Florence that day on the downs; the county ball; his subsequent expedition to Shawfield, and those few blissful days in her company. Then that memorable night at Crowhurst, and the despair and desolation at heart that followed. Then his imagination carried him to Venezuela, and the events of those two days rose up before him in a blurred and indistinct vision, through

which he seemed to see the pale, noble face of Mr Montenello, and to hear once more those dying words which had revealed to him such a strange secret. His mind, harassed and over-strung, was beginning to wander, and he was striving in vain to collect his ideas and realise his present position, when a light foot-fall sounded behind him, and, turning round with a start, he found that he was alone with Florence.

She had opened the door so noiselessly that he had not heard her enter; and now she stood there before him, in his eyes lovelier than ever, and seeming to his excited imagination almost like an angel from heaven. She too was dressed in deep mourning, and even in that moment of excitement Gerard thought, with an inward shudder, how little she knew what good reason she had to wear it. The plain black evening dress, fitting closely round her delicate throat, showed off her slender, graceful figure to great advantage, and made a pretty contrast with the sunny hair that clustered over her fair young face, a little pale and thin, but with the old sweet expression

unchanged. She blushed deeply as her eyes encountered Gerard's, but advanced to meet him with every appearance of complete self-possession, and held out her hand with a smile. "I am so glad to see you again, Mr Courtenay," she said, with just the slightest possible tremor in her voice, "it is so long since we have met, is it not?"

For the moment Gerard could not trust himself to speak. He bowed over her hand, striving to collect his thoughts and steady himself for what was impending, but was only able to murmur something almost inaudible and utterly incoherent about his pleasure at meeting her. For that one look had set his pulses trembling, and stirred up a wild joy in his heart that seemed altogether inconsistent with the sad news of which he was the bearer. It seemed to him that she was not the same Florence who had so sadly, yet so firmly, crushed his hopes that night at Crowhurst; that there was a look of softness, almost of encouragement, in her eyes, that he had never seen before; and his heart swelled within him as he recalled her father's words, and the hint

conveyed to him that he had not been altogether absent from her thoughts.

"It's so kind of you to let me see you," he at length replied, in a husky voice. "I went down to Shawfield, thinking you were still at Netherdean, but I heard at the station that you were here, so I came on at once. I have only just come back from abroad," he continued, scarcely knowing how best to approach the subject, "and I was most anxious to see you."

"How good of you, Mr Courtenay!" she returned, with, as it seemed to him, just a tinge of coldness in her voice. "Have you been abroad long then?"

"No," replied Gerard; "I have only been away about two months. I was sent out to San Fernando on some official business, and I happened—in fact, I have come straight from Venezuela."

"From Venezuela!" she exclaimed, with a start. "You don't say so! You don't mean to say—is it possible then?—why, you must have seen my father!"

Gerard felt that the moment had come,

and the sooner it was over now the better. He nerved himself for an effort, and looked her straight in the face, that sweet face that had haunted him for so long, and that looked to him so inexpressibly lovely.

"Lady Florence," he said, taking her hand in both of his, an action which she did not resent—"Florence, my darling,—you must forgive me for calling you so,—I have got something to say to you which will shock you very much, and I hardly know how to break it to you."

She grew deadly pale, but did not withdraw her hand from his. He bent down and kissed it reverently, and then resumed.

"I have seen your father, and have heard from his own lips the story of his life. And I have a letter for you, which he confided to my charge. But, Florence, my darling, my darling, I have a sad story to tell you, and —and you will never see him again in this world." And he fairly broke down himself.

For a few moments Gerard hardly knew what was going on. The room seemed to

swim round with him, and he was only dimly conscious of a sweet, pale face looking at him with a scared and dazed expression, and of a feeling that, somehow or other, he himself was to blame for it all. She had sunk down on a sofa, and sat with her hands folded, gazing straight before her with a look of blank despair. It was a fixed intensity of grief that was most distressing to look upon; and Gerard, overpowered by the love which he could no longer conceal, and distracted by the thought of the sorrow which he had indirectly been the means of bringing upon her, could hardly contain himself.

"Florence, dearest Florence," he said, kneeling down by her side, and striving to possess himself again of her hand, "it is dreadful for me to think that I should have had to bring you this terrible news, and I little thought what was to come when I left England two months ago. But there has been some special providence in it, Florence, I do believe," he said to himself. "I can't tell you all now; it would be too much for you. But let me give you this, which he

charged me to deliver into your own hands." And he drew out the precious letter.

She turned her head, and looked at him with a sad, wistful expression in those sweet hazel eyes, and took the letter from him almost mechanically, gazing at the address as if she hardly comprehended it. But she still neither spoke nor shed tears, and Gerard began to be seriously alarmed.

Fortunately, at this moment a diversion was effected by the entrance of Mrs Ashton, who, thinking that she had left the young people together quite long enough, and perhaps not without a certain feminine curiosity to learn what Gerard's visit could be about, rustled in with some *empressement*. "I am sorry to disturb you," she began, "but it's nearly a quarter to eight, and ——" But her observations were cut short by catching sight of Florence's pale and scared face, and of Gerard's anxious and distressed expression, which indicated unmistakably that something unusual had taken place.

"Dear me," she exclaimed, "what is the matter? Florence, my dear, what has hap-

pened? Mr Courtenay, what have you been saying to her?"

Gerard cast one look at Florence, and then stepped forward. "Mrs Ashton," he said, "I have had a very serious communication to make to Lady Florence, as I told you, and it has upset her very much, as I feared it would. I think I had better leave her now, and it will be best for her to be with you alone. I will wait till you send for me, and then I will tell you all about it, if you wish it." And he moved towards the door.

There was something in his manner that impressed Mrs Ashton, and made her feel that he was in the right. "Yes, go," she said, hurriedly. "Florence, my child," advancing towards her with outstretched arms, "tell me what it is, and perhaps I may be able to help you."

Gerard did not dare look behind him, but went quickly out of the room. In the hall he found his friend Mr Gregson hanging about in a state of the most intense curiosity, and evidently engaged in imparting his views to a footman, who listened to him with the

respect due to a superior officer who was to a certain extent in the secrets of the family.

"Look here," said Gerard, addressing the ancient retainer, "I wish to wait here a little, as I think Mrs Ashton will wish to see me again by and by. Just show me into some room where I can wait, and then come and let me know whenever she wishes to see me."

He spoke with an air of decision and authority, and the old man seemed to divine instinctively that something unusual had happened. He bowed gravely, and conducted Gerard to a little room opening out of the other end of the hall, a sort of little study or business room, lighted only by the occasional flickering of a fire that was smouldering in an old-fashioned grate. "I'll get a light in a moment, sir," he said, bustling about and stirring up the fire; "and won't you take a glass of wine or something, sir? Dinner was put off for half an hour, and it's long past that now."

Gerard declined the offer of refreshment,

and having with some difficulty persuaded his would-be entertainer to leave him alone in the dark, he threw himself into an arm-chair before the fire, and leant his burning forehead on his hand. It was a relief to him to be alone, and to stare vacantly into the glowing coals, wondering vaguely how Florence was getting on, and what was to happen next. It was impossible for him to collect his ideas sufficiently to reflect calmly on what had passed; but through the whirl of conflicting emotions there was a feeling of thankfulness that he had fulfilled his charge, and delivered to Florence the sacred missive from her father's deathbed; and above all, there was a sense of wild, triumphant joy as he told himself that she could hardly have received him in the way she had done unless he had at least some place in her heart.

Worn out by excitement, following on a succession of broken nights and a long journey, a sense of drowsiness gradually overcame him, and he began to doze. He was dropping off into a sort of feverish slumber, occasionally awakening with a start as a coal dropped out

of the grate, or a momentary flicker of flame shot up from the smouldering embers, when the door opened, and Mrs Ashton appeared once more.

"Dear me, Mr Courtenay, you are all in the dark; let me ring for a light. I am so sorry to have kept you all this time, but poor Florence"——

"Never mind a light, Mrs Ashton," exclaimed Gerard, starting up and stirring the fire; "but do tell me how she is. She has told you, of course; and now you know what I have come about; but tell me, how is she, and does she feel it very much?"

"Ah, poor child," replied Mrs Ashton, "she is terribly upset, and no wonder. Dear me, Mr Courtenay, what an extraordinary story it is! Do you really mean to say there is no doubt about it,—you are quite sure there is no mistake? And how did it happen, for you have not told her that yet, have you? What! shot by Indians, and died the same night! How dreadful! Dear me, I saw him once when I was at Netherdean, but of course I never thought of anything of this

kind. And to think that my poor brother should have known who he was all the time!" And the good lady would have run on in this strain indefinitely if Gerard had not interrupted her.

"But tell me, I entreat you," he repeated, "do you think it has affected her very much? I feel as if I were responsible for it all, somehow, and it must have given her a terrible shock. Do you think I might see her again for a moment?"

"No, poor dear, you can't see her now; we have taken her up to her room, and I must go and look after her again. She is bearing it wonderfully well, poor child, and she has had a good cry, which has done her good; but of course it is a great shock to her, and I am afraid she will feel it more by and by. But, dear me, Mr Courtenay, you have had no dinner, and it's nearly nine. You will stop here all night, of course, and I will tell them to have dinner directly."

Gerard could not refuse such an offer. "You are very kind indeed," he said. "I had

thought of stopping at the Collingwood Arms, but perhaps"——

"Oh, dear no," exclaimed Mrs Ashton. "I couldn't think of such a thing. No; of course you must stop here. I'll go and see about your room at once, and then you must have some dinner." And she bustled out of the room.

Gerard remained there for a moment, and then, remembering that all this time his dog-cart was presumably waiting at the door, he made his way through the hall, and found the driver, who had philosophically resigned himself to circumstances, fast asleep on the door-step, while the horse, with a rug thrown over him, appeared to have followed his example. Having roused his charioteer, and liberally compensated him; and having ascertained, moreover, that his services could be obtained, if desired, on the following day, he returned into the hall, and awaited the course of events.

He had not much longer to wait before the old butler reappeared, and informed him that his room was all ready, and that dinner had

been ordered for him in a quarter of an hour. "Mrs Ashton desired me to give you her compliments, sir," continued the old gentleman, in a confidential tone, "and to say that she was sure you'd excuse her, but she has gone back to Lady Florence, and she didn't like to leave her just now."

Gerard found a snug little bedroom assigned to him, which, although hastily prepared, seemed to him the picture of comfort. The fire was already burning brightly, casting a warm glow over the prettily-papered walls; a charming little French bed suggested pleasant ideas of repose; and the thought that he was for the first time to pass the night under the same roof with Florence was, despite his anxiety, a very delightful one.

Under the circumstances we have narrated, an orthodox and traditional hero would of course have had very little appetite for his dinner. He would have pushed away his plate untasted, and have just touched a glass of wine with his lips, setting it down again with a heavy sigh. Or possibly he might have sought relief in intoxication, and have

swallowed bumper after bumper with the feverish recklessness denoting a mind ill at ease. In any case his repast would have been an eminently unsatisfactory one. We regret to state that none of these conditions were fulfilled by our hero. On the contrary, whether from fatigue or excitement, he found himself to be decidedly hungry, and did ample justice to a very nice little dinner and two or three glasses of excellent claret. He could certainly have dispensed with the officious attentions of Mr Gregson, who having begun by regarding him with something approaching to suspicion, had rapidly come round to the conclusion that he was a person to be encouraged and made much of. But having at last got rid of him, he drew his chair up to the fire, feeling all the better for his dinner, and prepared for any emergency.

He was wondering how Florence was feeling, and thinking what he ought to do next, when old Gregson returned, and informed him that Mrs Ashton would be glad to see him before he went to bed. Starting up, he followed the old man to the little morning

room where he had met Florence, and found his hostess alone.

"I hope they have made you comfortable, Mr Courtenay," she said. "I am so sorry to have left you alone, but I didn't like to leave poor Florence, you know. But she has gone to bed now, poor child, and I hope she will go to sleep by and by."

"How is she now, Mrs Ashton?" asked Gerard, anxiously. "Do you think I shall be able to see her in the morning?"

"Oh well, I hope so," she returned, looking curiously and not unkindly at him. It is hardly necessary to say that, with a woman's instinct, she had very soon divined that Gerard had a deeper interest in Florence than was to be accounted for by the mere fact of his being the bearer of a letter to her from her father. Gerard saw that she had guessed his secret, and longed to sound her as to Florence's feelings.

But whether from prudence or reserve, Mrs Ashton did not appear desirous of encouraging his confidence. "Poor child," she continued, "it is very hard for her, is it

not, when she has never known her father all her life, to have him taken from her just as it had all come out, you know? I'm sure I don't know what she will do. Only fancy, though, if he had lived, what an awkward thing it would have been for the rest of the family! Well, well, perhaps it's all for the best, who can tell? But we must talk about all this to-morrow, Mr Courtenay. I am sure you must be very tired, and I shall wish you good-night."

And with sundry hopes that he would find himself comfortable, and sleep well, the good lady retired. There was nothing then left for Gerard but to go to bed himself.

CHAPTER XLII.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

When Gerard awoke the next morning, it was some moments before he was able to realise where he was. Three weeks at sea are apt to somewhat derange and unsettle one's home ideas; and Gerard, who, except for the one night at the Grosvenor Hotel, had passed that time in a steamboat berth, was for the moment quite at a loss to account for his present situation. First he thought he was at Sydmonton, and then at San Fernando, and then, as the train of his thoughts led him to Venezuela and Florence, the real state of things suddenly flashed upon him.

He looked at his watch, and found that it was a quarter to eight. Daylight was showing itself through the chinks of his shutters, and making the objects in the room just visible in a dim and uncertain sort of way. He

jumped out of bed and proceeded to open the window. It was a soft February morning; the mist was lifting here and there from the hollows in the park; the first rays of the sun were lighting up the dark fir woods and the distant hills; the rooks were already astir, winging their way in noisy battalions to their feeding-grounds, and everything looked bright and cheerful. "What a grand day for a hunt!" was Gerard's first thought; and then, leaving the window open, he betook himself again to bed, to think over the situation at leisure.

Somehow or other, and despite the anxiety he could not help feeling, the aspect of things in general seemed much brighter to him this morning. It was an incalculable relief to him to feel that he had fulfilled his sacred duty of breaking the news to Florence, and delivering to her the letter from her father. And he could not disguise from himself that to whatever extent she might for the time being be affected by the intelligence of her father's death, it could not possibly be the same

thing as if she had known him as a father all her life; and that however poignant might be her distress and disappointment at being deprived of a father at the very moment when he had been revealed to her, there could not be the same feeling of lasting regret in the case of a parent whom she had hitherto regarded as nothing more than a friend, and whom, however warm that friendship might have been, she had only been in the habit of seeing at rare and intermittent intervals.

While meditating deeply over his prospects, he heard a knock at his door, and his friend Mr Gregson entered with his clothes and hot water. Having made the necessary arrangements for Gerard's comfort, he approached the bed, and informed him in a confidential manner that it was eight o'clock. "Mrs Ashton," he added, "wished me to give you her kind regards, sir, and to tell you that Lady Florence has had some sleep, and seems better this morning."

Gerard expressed his gratification in a befitting manner, and then, when the old man had left the room, buried his face in the

pillow with a thrill of delight. For, apart from the relief which he naturally felt at hearing such comparatively good news of Florence, the mere fact of it being considered necessary to send him a message about her seemed to him to have a most delightful significance. It looked like a recognition of his interest in her—a sort of concession of proprietorship, in fact. And could it be possible that she had sent him the message herself, or suggested that it should be sent to him? No, this could hardly be; but it was very delightful to be thus associated with her. So he got up, and performed his toilet in a decidedly hopeful frame of mind; and then, at the summons of a gong, went downstairs with a beating heart.

He was met in the hall by old Gregson, who conducted him to the dining-room, where a few moments later he was joined by his hostess. "I hope you slept well, Mr Courtenay," she said, after the usual greetings, "and found everything comfortable in your room. I sent you a message about Florence,

as I was sure you would be anxious to hear how she was. Poor child, she was in a dreadful state last night; but she got to sleep at last, and slept for three or four hours. I took her up some tea myself about an hour ago, and she has gone to sleep again, so I hope she will be much better when she wakes."

Gerard murmured something about Mrs Ashton's kindness, and his own distress at having been the bearer of such sad news. "It must have seemed so extraordinary to you at first, Mrs Ashton," he said, "my coming here in this way, knowing nothing of you, and—and so little of Lady Florence. But I was bound to find her out at once, and give her that letter; and my only fear is that I may perhaps have broken it too suddenly to her."

"Oh, no," replied Mrs Ashton, "I am sure you did quite right. When these things have got to be done, the sooner they are got over the better. It is all so strange and terrible that I can hardly realise it yet, and coming so close on my poor brother's death too.

You see, Mr Courtenay," she continued, speaking in such a feeling and natural manner as quite to win Gerard's heart, "poor Florence has been in such a strange and unusual position all her life. She has always looked upon my poor brother more as a father than anything else, and she has felt his death very much. But when she found that her own father was actually living, it was something so new and unexpected for her, poor child, that she could think of nothing else; and of course it is a dreadful thing for her to have it all suddenly snatched away. But she seems to be bearing it wonderfully well; and I do trust she will be better to-day. I am sure I don't know what we ought to do now. I suppose Lord Narborough doesn't know of this yet;—poor young man, he wrote Florence a very nice letter about a week ago, and of course then he thought he would have to give up the title and everything else. But I suppose that's all at an end now, and he will go on just the same?"

"Yes," replied Gerard, not without a certain feeling of exultation at the thought of the

position he occupied in regard to the family secret; "the sooner he knows it now the better. He and I are distantly connected by marriage, and I know him very well, so there will be no difficulty about that. I think it would be best if I were to go back to London to-night, as there will be a great deal for me to do; but—but I ought to see Florence—Lady Florence—again, Mrs Ashton; do you think there would be any chance of my seeing her this afternoon?"

"Oh, well, I daresay you might," replied Mrs Ashton, with a slight degree of hesitation; "that's to say, if you think it would not agitate her too much. Of course, you know, she must naturally associate you with him—with her father, poor child; and then, she will want to know by and by how it all happened. But, do you know, Mr Courtenay, I can't help thinking—I may be wrong, but I'm sure you won't mind my saying so—in fact, you seem to me to have rather an interest in Florence apart from this sad affair"——

"Mrs Ashton," broke in Gerard, actuated by a sudden impulse, "it's no use beating

about the bush, and I may as well tell you the truth. I do love her—most devotedly, and I ventured to tell her so more than a year ago; but it was no use then, and I don't wonder at it, for I had no business to speak to her so soon. But her father knew of it, or guessed it, somehow, and he did not say anything against it; in fact, he rather encouraged me, and I feel that I must speak to her, or I can't bear it any longer. Of course I couldn't say anything yesterday, you know; but don't you think I might see her again before I go this evening?"

It is an old saying that all women are by nature matchmakers at heart, and that their instincts will generally be on the side of a true love affair—often all the more for its being utterly undesirable or unreasonable. Mrs Ashton's disposition was certainly not such as to make her an exception to this rule. She had guessed how matters stood from the first; she rather liked what she had seen of Gerard; the romance and excitement attaching to his sudden appearance, charged as he was with intelligence of such strange and

momentous import, was all in his favour; and she was, in fact, quite prepared to back him up to the utmost of her powers.

"I thought there was something of this sort, Mr Courtenay," she said, with a kind smile. "Well, she's a sweet girl, and any one will be very lucky who wins her, there's no doubt about that. I'm sure I don't know what I ought to say to you. You see, she is, as it were, under my care just now, and then there will be her own family, of course, to consider; but after all, she must make up her own mind, and it's no business of mine. Dear me! she will be quite an heiress now, I suppose. You know, my poor brother has left Netherdean to her, not that that's much, but I suppose all this property of her father's will come to her now. But I do hope you are in earnest, Mr Courtenay, and are quite sure that you know your own mind; for I could not bear to think that any one was going to trifle with her feelings; she has had quite enough trouble without anything of that sort, poor child."

Gerard of course fervently protested his earnestness. "I don't think you need be afraid

of that, Mrs Ashton," he said. "I only wish you knew what I really feel about her. I know I am utterly unworthy of her, and I have no right to suppose that she should think favourably of me even now; but, somehow, I can't help hoping, and I can't possibly go away without seeing her again."

"Well, I think you look as if you might be trusted," replied Mrs Ashton, with a kindly squeeze of the hand, "and, anyhow, you may be sure I will not stand in your way. Now I must go and see how she is getting on, and if you can manage to amuse yourself till luncheon time, I will let you know how she is then."

Two o'clock found our hero hanging about in a state of nervous anxiety and impatience. With the praiseworthy object of distracting his mind, and giving himself something to do, he had started off on a walk which he calculated would not bring him back till luncheon time. He had found his way up to the keeper's house, and having made friends with that functionary, inspected the kennel, and listened, with as much appearance

of interest as he could command, to a retrospective sketch of the past shooting season in that district; had struck away across the park in the direction of the hills, and, effecting a *détour* of some seven or eight miles, had got back to the house at about half-past one. Under any other circumstances he would have enjoyed his walk immensely that bright February morning; and even as it was, the fresh air and exercise did him good, and to a certain extent brought about the object he had in view. It is needless to say, however, that the one absorbing thought of Florence was ever present to him, and he found himself perpetually looking at his watch, and counting the half-hours that seemed to pass so slowly. And once having got into difficulties by attempting a short cut through a wood, which only led him, after much wandering about, into a hopeless sort of ravine, from which he was compelled, with much trouble, to retrace his steps, he got into a perfect fever of apprehension lest he should get back late, and so miss the chance of seeing her.

He found his way back, however, by half-past one, and having been informed that luncheon would be ready at two, proceeded to establish himself in the hall, and go through the form of reading the papers, casting an impatient glance at intervals to the slow-moving hands of the clock. It was evident that punctuality was a leading feature in the internal economy of Mrs Ashton's household, for at two o'clock precisely the gong sounded, and a few moments later the rustle of a dress was heard along the corridor, the door was thrown open by Mr Gregson, who had been lying in wait behind it, and the lady of the house appeared once more, but, alas! alone.

"I hope you have had a nice walk, Mr Courtenay," she said; "I am sure you will be glad of some luncheon. I am afraid we shall be quite alone," leading the way into the dining-room; "but Florence will not be down just now. She is better, though, and has had some more sleep this morning, and I think she will perhaps be down by and by."

Gerard followed his hostess into the dining-room with a feeling of vexation and disappointment, for although he had hardly hoped to see Florence at luncheon, he had indulged in the hope that she would perhaps send him a message, or in some way, at any rate, recognise his being there. But he felt all the more determined to try and see her again and bring matters to an issue before he left that evening. With this object in view, he broached the subject of his departure as soon as the servants had left the room. "I see there is a train from Skipworth at seven, Mrs Ashton," he remarked in a tone of assumed indifference, "which will catch the mail at Newcastle; and if you will allow me, I will order a trap from the Collingwood Arms to be here at six. The man who brought me here yesterday said that a message by the postman from here would reach them by five o'clock, so that will be plenty of time."

"Dear me! must you really go, Mr Courtenay?" exclaimed Mrs Ashton. "I do wish you could stay with us for a day or two; it

seems to me that there is so much to talk about, and so many things I should like to ask you; but it has all been such a shock to me that I can hardly think of anything at present. And then, Florence, you know—of course you must see her; but I really don't know whether she will be up to it this afternoon."

But Gerard had grown almost desperate.

"Mrs Ashton," he said, "I really must go to-night, for you know this ought to be told to Narborough at once. But I must see her before I go. If all goes well—you know what I mean—I shall hope to come back here again very soon; that's to say, if you will let me. But see her I must; and I am sure you will not stand in the way, will you?"

He spoke almost beseechingly, and yet in such a tone as showed Mrs Ashton that he was in earnest.

"Yes, I believe you are right," she replied, after a moment's thought, "and she had better see you. Wait here a few minutes, Mr Courtenay, and I will go and speak to her now."

Gerard had not long to wait. In ten minutes Mrs Ashton had returned, with the intelligence that Florence would be down in half an hour. "And she will see you in my room," continued the good lady, with a benevolent smile. "Now, you had better go and take a turn on the terrace, and then you can come in and wait for her."

* * * * *

If any one had looked into Mrs Ashton's little sitting-room about an hour and a half later, they might have seen two persons sitting on a sofa in close proximity to each other, and apparently on the best possible terms. They do not talk much, but they appear to be very happy, notwithstanding. If either of them were asked, they would probably be unable to say exactly how it was that they found themselves in that position, but now it seems to come very natural. She has a letter in one hand, and the other is held captive by her companion, who shows no inclination to let it go. Suddenly she lifts her head, and looks in his face, with a half-shy, half-amused smile.

"What is it, my darling?" he says, and his arm steals round her slender waist, as he draws her still nearer to him.

"Gerard," she whispers, with a lovely blush, as she hides her head on his shoulder, "do you know, I can't help thinking that I must have loved you all the time!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

We have devoted so much attention to following up the fortunes of our hero that we fear we have somewhat neglected the other characters of our story, to whom, therefore, we hasten to return, with every apology for having kept them so long standing on one side. And having resuscitated a gentleman who had been supposed to be dead for many years, a circumstance that could hardly be otherwise than disquieting and embarrassing to his family circle, our first duty is clearly towards those likely to be most directly affected by such an event.

It is hardly necessary to observe that the discovery of the existence of a previous Lord Narborough, brought to light by certain documents found among Mr Baldwin's papers at that gentleman's decease, had excited con-

siderable interest and speculation, not only among the members of the Middleton family, but in society at large. The effect produced by the intelligence upon the present holder of the title was, if somewhat peculiar, at least such as might be said to do credit to his feelings. He forthwith betook himself to bed, from which retreat he despatched a summons to his solicitor, requesting his immediate attendance. Upon the arrival of the man of law, he found his noble client, with a pale but determined face, in the act of drawing up the draft of a document, apparently intended to be something between a will and an affidavit, whereby he desired to renounce all claim to the Narborough title and estates in favour of his resuscitated uncle. "I, Thomas Middleton," so ran this remarkable production, "hitherto styled Earl of Narborough, Baron Easthampton, &c., &c., being sound of body, though in great distress of mind, do hereby, and in the presence of witnesses ——." Beyond this point, however, his lordship had not as yet advanced; but he proceeded to explain to his

solicitor that he desired a complete and formal deed of renunciation to be drawn up, such as could leave no room for doubt as to his entire and voluntary relinquishment of title, estates, and personal property. "My wife, as you are aware," he added, with a simplicity and quiet dignity that contrasted curiously with the ludicrous aspect of the proposed arrangement, "has now two hundred a year of her own; and I daresay some of my friends will be able to help me to some ap-p-pointment that will keep us and our children from starving."

It was with some difficulty that the lawyer succeeded in persuading his lordship that any such action as he proposed must necessarily be premature; that, after all, no absolute proof was as yet forthcoming as to the truth of the extraordinary story that had been set on foot; that even if his uncle really were alive, as stated, it rested with him to come forward and assert his claim; and that, until he did so, the accepted holder of the title was unquestionably its legal representative. It was some time before this reasoning had any effect; but his lordship at length consented

to postpone any action for the present, and await the course of events. "Wait for a couple of months, anyhow, my lord," pleaded his legal adviser; "if your uncle is really alive, which I must confess I very much doubt, he will know by that time that his secret has transpired, and he will be bound to take some steps in the matter, or, at any rate, to let us know what he means to do."

So it was settled that no outward alteration should take place for the present in the status or circumstances of the Narborough family, and that everything should, as far as possible, go on as usual. His lordship left his bedroom, and appeared again among his household, though rather with the air of a gentleman sentenced to death, who has obtained a temporary reprieve, but who has private reasons for believing that he will infallibly be hanged within the next fortnight. He clung religiously to his draft deed of renunciation, in the composition and correction of which he evinced a melancholy pride, and which certainly appeared to afford him some mournful consolation in his troubles. Things therefore went

on ostensibly much as usual in the establishment, though it was impossible that, after the thunderbolt which had fallen upon it, there should not be a certain amount of demoralisation perceptible even to a chance observer. Poor Lady Narborough had, as was only natural, been much upset, though her own sweet disposition and happy temperament enabled her to put a fairly good face on the matter. The house began to assume a shut-up, funereal appearance, much as if there had been a death in the family; every one went about with a gloomy expression, and talked in subdued voices; and the upper servants began to look about them, and make their own arrangements in view of the expected collapse.

Matters had been in this state for about a fortnight, when one morning, about eleven o'clock, a fly was observed driving up the approach with a gentleman inside. The sound of wheels brought all the servants to the windows, for during the last few days strange people had been coming backwards and forwards from London, and who should

say that the next arrival might not be the real original Lord Narborough himself, come in person to demand his title and estates from his nephew? Some slight disappointment was therefore experienced when the occupant of the vehicle was recognised by one of the men-servants as a person of no greater importance than our friend Gerard. "What on earth can *he* want here just now?" thought the groom of the chambers to himself, as, having despatched a footman to open the door, he hovered about in the background to receive and announce the visitor.

"Her ladyship," muttered the footman to his superior, as he passed Gerard on to his hands.

"Yes, Tomkins," said Gerard, with a nod of recognition to the man, "I should like to see her ladyship at once, and alone, if possible, you understand."

He felt that it would be easier and more satisfactory to impart his news to Lady Narborough than to her lord; and he was also desirous of taking her into his con-

fidence about Florence. So he waited patiently in the empty library till informed that her ladyship would be glad to see him.

He found Lady Narborough sitting at a writing-table, with a quantity of papers before her, and an anxious and troubled expression on her face. "Oh, Gerard!" she exclaimed, rising and coming forward to meet him, "I am very glad to see you; but what can have brought you here just now? I thought you were away. You will find a great change here," she continued, with a sigh. "Of course you have heard what has happened?"

"Oh yes, I have heard all about it," replied Gerard. "I have only just come back, but I heard of it as soon as I arrived. In fact," he continued, with some hesitation, not feeling quite sure how best to approach the subject, "it was about this that I wanted to see you, and so I came down at once."

"Why, what can you mean, Gerard?" inquired Lady Narborough, noticing his em-

barrassed manner with some surprise. "Surely you have heard nothing new."

"Well, I may as well tell you at once," said Gerard, feeling that it was best to make a clean breast of it; "but you must prepare yourself to hear something very startling."

And without more ado he proceeded to recount to her, as briefly as possible, his expedition to the West Indies, and the strange adventure with which it had ended.

Lady Narborough listened with breathless attention and with praiseworthy efforts at composure. But when Gerard had finished his recital, the sense of reaction was too much for her, and she fairly broke down, and hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, Gerard!" she gasped out, "is this really true? You are sure there can have been no mistake?"

Gerard shook his head, with a smile.

"It's all as true as that I am sitting here," he replied, "though sometimes I can hardly believe it myself; but there will be plenty

of others to prove it by and by, if necessary."

"It has all been so strange, I hardly know what to think," continued Lady Narborough, recovering herself a little; "and it seems just like a dream. And then, you know, Gerard, there is his daughter Florence—Miss Graham she was called; she is now our cousin, of course. She will have to be told, and how dreadful it will be for her!"

"She has been told," returned Gerard, quietly; "she knows everything. I saw her yesterday, up in Northumberland, where she is staying with Mrs Ashton, Mr Baldwin's sister; in fact, I have come straight from there,—I travelled up last night."

"But, Gerard, I don't understand. Do you mean to say that you told her?—why, surely you don't know her, do you?"

"Yes," replied Gerard, with a strange, exultant feeling of happiness, "I do know her. I have known her for the last year or more, though of course I never suspected who she was. But I have something more to tell you about her, if you will let me."

And he proceeded to impart to his astonished listener the story of his love.

"Well, Gerard," said Lady Narborough, when he had finished, "this is certainly the most extraordinary story I ever heard. And do you really mean to say that you are engaged to her? I hope she is nice, but I am sure she must be. I should so like to see her; you must bring her here, Gerard you know, by and by. I did write to her, and ask her to come, but she preferred stopping with Mrs —— what's the old lady's name?—up in Northumberland for the present. And oh, Gerard, this will of course be a great relief to us, you know. I didn't mind it so much for myself, and then I could not help feeling that some day it would be all ours again, for of course he must have been an old man; but poor Narborough has felt it very much, and it seems to have affected him in such a strange way." And her ladyship could not help smiling, as she thought of her lord and master in bed, with his attendant solicitor and his deed of renunciation.

"He must be told this at once," she continued, after a pause, during which she had quite recovered herself. "Come with me now, Gerard, and you shall tell him yourself."

This, however, was more than our friend had bargained for. The prospect of another explanation to his lordship, attended, as it must inevitably be, by a certain amount of awkwardness, was rather formidable. "No," he replied, "you had much better break it to him yourself first, and then, if he wants any more information, he can write to me, and I will come down again. Besides, I must be off directly; I have kept my fly waiting, and I have to catch the two o'clock train back to London."

"Oh, Gerard, must you really go? But you must have some luncheon, anyhow; I'll have some got ready in the little dining-room. You have plenty of time, you know; it's not one yet."

So, after a hasty luncheon, and a warm parting with Lady Narborough, our hero packed himself again into his fly, and pro-

ceeded on his return journey to London, feeling immensely relieved at having got this part of the business satisfactorily over. It had been arranged between him and her ladyship, before parting, that he should go and see the family solicitor in London, and put him in possession of the facts of the case; so, on his arrival, he drove straight to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and demanded an immediate interview. Having no feelings of sentiment in this quarter, his story was quickly told; but even the dry and hardened legal practitioner was unable to repress his feelings of astonishment. He made a few careful notes of certain points, and expressed his intention of going down to Easthampton the following day. "You will understand, my dear Mr Courtenay," he added, "that as a lawyer I am bound to look at every aspect of the case, and to question every point. I must say that hitherto I have inclined to doubt the truth of the whole story; but if your evidence is correct, and of course I do not pretend to question it, you have accidentally assisted at the revelation of one of the most extraordinary

romances that has ever come within my experience."

"Then there's nothing more for me to do at present?" inquired Gerard, anxious to get away. "You will see that everything is done that is required."

"Oh, of course I shall see to that," replied the lawyer; "though at this moment I cannot say that there is anything particular to be done. The title was confirmed to the present Lord Narborough's father, you know, and all that has happened will not affect that judgment. But I should be glad to have your address, in case you are required for any purpose. I am already in communication with the late Mr Baldwin's solicitor regarding—ahem—Lady Florence's affairs and other matters."

Ah!" thought Gerard, as he was bowed out. "You will find out something more about that by and by."

He had not thought it necessary to take the lawyer into his confidence as regarded his own private relations with Florence, rightly judging that the state of affairs would speedily

transpire without any action on his part. So having looked in at his lodgings, he made his way to the General Enquiry Office, in order to report himself to his chief.

He found the Vice-President busy with a deputation, and a variety of work requiring his own attention; so that no opportunity offered itself at the moment of speaking of his private affairs. But about six o'clock Lord Ravendale came into his room with his hat on, and his hands full of papers. "I'm off to the House, Gerard, my boy," he said; "you can just look over these things, and dispose of anything you can to-night. You will find minutes on most of them, and some will do very well for the waste-paper basket. By the way, are you dining anywhere to-night?—if not, I wish you would come and dine with me quietly in Grosvenor Square."

Gerard readily assented, feeling that a quiet *tête-à-tête* at dinner would be far more suitable for a confidential discussion. "All right, then," continued his lordship, hurrying off; "eight o'clock, you know. I say, it's all right about the young woman, I hope?"

He seemed somewhat preoccupied, and scarcely stopped for an answer; but Gerard was just able to intimate that matters presented on the whole rather a favourable aspect than otherwise, and then, having seen his chief off the premises, proceeded, with a lighter heart than he had felt for some time, to clear up his work for the evening.

Eight o'clock saw our friend in Grosvenor Square, where he found a cosy little table laid for two in the library.

"His lordship is dressing, sir," observed the servant who let him in, "but he won't be many minutes now." So Gerard stood before the fire, in a very comfortable frame both of mind and body, and thinking what a lucky fellow he was.

The Vice-President and his private secretary had a very snug little dinner together that evening. Gerard had never known his chief to be kinder or more sympathetic. He made him tell his whole story over again from beginning to end, evincing the greatest interest throughout. Gerard's engagement to Florence appeared in itself to

afford him great satisfaction, a circumstance which caused our hero some surprise, as Lord Ravendale's views on the subject of matrimony were generally understood to be rather unfavourable to that institution than otherwise.

"By Jove," he said, "I think you're in great luck, Gerard. She must be a real good 'un, I'm sure, from your accounts; and then I suppose there'll be some money, eh? Why, I suppose all that place in Venezuela will be hers, won't it? And then that old chap she lived with is bound to have left her something?"

"I really don't know about that," replied Gerard, with lofty disinterestedness. "I don't suppose the Venezuela property will be worth much, really, and of course she could never live there. I believe that old Mr Baldwin has left his house to her, down in Wealdshire, you know, but there is no property, I fancy."

We must do our hero the justice to say that he really was far too much in love to have thought much about the financial aspect

of the case. He had a general idea that there would be a certain amount of money forthcoming from somewhere; and it was very nice to think that Netherdean would be hers, the place he had first known her, and which must always be hallowed to him by such tender recollections. But beyond this his speculations had not extended; and he was at present far too much engrossed with the personal charms of his *fiancée* to come down to the sordid consideration of £ s. d.

"Ah, well," observed Lord Ravendale, as he passed the claret to Gerard, and stood up to warm himself at the fire, "I daresay you'll find it's all right; though, mind you, I'm all against marrying without something to live upon, you know. However, I've no doubt you've done the right thing, and I'm sure I wish you every happiness. By Jove!" continued his lordship, with a certain air of embarrassment that Gerard could not help noticing, "I suppose it's the sort of thing we all come to. You're beginning rather early, you know; but of course at my time of life one has to think seriously of it if one means business. In fact,

I won't say, you know, that I haven't now and then had some idea of it myself."

Gerard of course assented, feeling some curiosity as to what was coming next.

"Well, I may as well tell you at once," continued the Vice-President, "for it's sure to be all over the place in a day or two. The fact is, I've arranged matters with your relative, Lady Adelaide Middleton, and I suppose it won't be very long before it comes off."

Gerard was no less astonished than pleased at this intelligence, and expressed his congratulations in the warmest terms. "She's an awfully nice girl," he said. "You know, she's not exactly my cousin, though I've always called her so; but I have known her all my life, and we are great friends."

"Ah, yes, she seemed to know something about you," replied his lordship, with a smile. "By Jove! now I think of it, you and I will be marrying cousins, eh? Let's see, your young woman will be Lady Florence Middleton now, won't she? Yes, of course, they're bound to give her her rank and title as an earl's daughter. Come, that's a very curious

coincidence, and, by Jove! we must have been settling our affairs the same day, I believe, for my business only came off yesterday. Devilish odd, isn't it? Well, we'll drink both their healths, anyhow, Gerard, my boy." And the Vice-President made a dash at the claret, evidently much relieved at having unburthened himself of his confession.

Gerard eagerly joined in the toast, and the two then sat silent for some time, looking into the fire, and occupied each with their own thoughts.

"I have often wanted," said Gerard at length, "to thank you for all the kindness you have shown me since I have been your private secretary. It seems to me that I owe all my good fortune to this, somehow or other; and if I had gone on in the old office life, I don't know what would have become of me by this time. I am sure I owe a great deal to you."

"My dear boy," rejoined his chief, laying his hand affectionately on his private secretary's shoulder, "don't say anything about that. Why, I must have had some one,

you know, and I'm sure I'm very glad that it happened to be you. You've suited me uncommonly well, and have been a great help to me in many ways. I must say, you know, it struck me that a fellow with your connections, and all that sort of thing, was just a little out of place in an office like that, and that you might perhaps have made a better start for yourself; but I'm all the more pleased, on that account, to have been able to give you a bit of a lift. Now, then, we'll have a cigar, and after a bit I shall have to go back to the House for the division."

CHAPTER XLIV.

"BLESS YOU, MY CHILDREN!"

As Lord Ravendale had predicted, it was not long before his own engagement was announced in the papers; and a few days later there appeared in a conspicuous position in the *Morning Post*, under the heading of "The Narborough Peerage," a paragraph announcing, in somewhat mysterious and guarded terms, that a further revelation in this remarkable case had recently been brought to light, and that it was probable that, after all, the present holder of the title would continue to retain it undisturbed. Within a week, the whole story was in all the papers; and Gerard, whose name had somehow or other leaked out in connection with it, found himself the object of a good deal of notice. He had previously had another interview with the Narborough lawyer, who had explained to him that he

had thought it advisable to make further inquiries by telegraph, and found that the report of Mr Montenello's death, which had been the principal topic for some weeks in the villages along that part of the Venezuelan coast, had reached San Fernando, and that there could be no reasonable doubt on the subject. Under these circumstances, as he informed Gerard, he thought it best to make the matter public at once, and was about, with Lord Narborough's concurrence, to communicate the information to the newspapers.

Having now, as he considered, fairly discharged his duty by the Narborough family and the public in general, Gerard felt at liberty to concentrate his attention upon his own affairs. So, after three or four days spent in London, during which time he experienced the rapturous sensation of writing to and receiving a letter from Florence, he obtained a week's leave from his indulgent chief, the first two days of which he proposed to devote to the filial duty of visiting his parents; having previously mentioned, in writing to announce his return,

that he had a communication of importance to make to them about himself which he trusted they would not receive amiss.

The returned traveller was of course warmly received at Bayford House, and the interest attaching to his reappearance was in no way lessened by the announcement of his engagement to a young lady of position who, during the last few weeks, had become almost a public character. Lady Theodosia, indeed, who had always displayed a motherly anxiety to get one at least of her sons married and settled, was overjoyed at the intelligence, and expressed in the most unqualified terms her unbounded satisfaction with the arrangement, and her delight at the prospect of welcoming Florence as a daughter. Mr Courtenay, sen., as became an old diplomatist and man of the world, was less effusive in his reception of the news. "It would, perhaps, have been better, Gerard," he observed, "if you had consulted your father and mother before taking this important step, as you must be aware that in such a matter our consent would be necessary before any

definite arrangement could be arrived at. At the same time, I will not say that, as it has turned out, I am prepared to offer any objection to your engagement to this young lady; and I need hardly say that the friendship which existed between her father and myself when we were both young men, and which has been brought back to me in this very remarkable manner, will induce me to take a special interest in her." Not that it would ever really have occurred to the worthy old gentleman to make the smallest objection to what was obviously a by no means undesirable match for his son, and which must, therefore, indirectly reflect a certain amount of credit upon himself; and to do him justice, he had really been much affected by the strange story of the man whom he believed to have been dead for many years, and between whom and himself had existed a warm friendship which, in spite of considerable incongruity of disposition, had been maintained till the very last. They had, in fact, corresponded regu-

larly until within a few months of the time when Lord Narborough had disappeared, and no one beyond his immediate family circle had been more affected by the news of his death than Charles Courtenay. It was only natural, therefore, that his heart should warm towards the child of one of his earliest and dearest friends; and having, as he considered, duly asserted his paternal authority, he was pleased, before Gerard's departure, and when he had learned from him a little more as to Florence's prospects, including the fact that she would at any rate be mistress of Netherdean, to look upon the matter in a distinctly favourable light, and to express himself as entirely satisfied with the arrangement.

It is scarcely necessary to say that, having relieved his conscience as regards his father and mother, Gerard's one idea was to be once more with his lady-love. Under such circumstances it would have been impossible for even Lady Theodosia to wish to keep him at home; so after a couple of days spent at Bayford

House he started off again northward, with a light heart, and in full possession of the parental benediction. If his first journey to Scratby Hall had appeared long and tedious, it seemed doubly so on the present occasion; but Mrs Ashton's carriage was at the station to meet him this time, a pleasantly significant little incident in itself; and it is not improbable that his reception on his arrival was calculated to make him forget everything else in his new-found happiness.

During the four or five days spent by Gerard at Scratby Hall—days that seemed to him as glimpses of paradise—he had for the first time an opportunity for quiet and unreserved conversation with Florence upon various matters of interest; among others, the circumstances connected with Mr Baldwin's death, which had been the direct means of revealing such an unlooked-for secret. In the first hurry and excitement of his return, it had not occurred to Gerard to inquire the exact day when this happened; but it had since occurred to him that it must have been

within a very short time of that of Florence's father. And although he had somewhat lost count of dates during those never-to-be-forgotten days in Venezuela, he was not long in coming to the startling conclusion that both events must have taken place almost simultaneously.

"Yes, Jerry," she said—for she was beginning to get quite accustomed to so addressing him—"it must have been the very same night, I do believe. He had been quite well up to the day before, but a change seemed to come over him that afternoon. He seemed so absent and pre-occupied, and he hardly spoke at all during the evening. However, he declared there was nothing the matter with him, and we all went to bed as usual. He used often to sit up late, but that night we thought he had gone to bed, for he certainly went up to his room. But he didn't go to bed, for early next morning I was awoke by a great talking and commotion, and then Alice, my maid, you know, rushed into my room as white as a sheet, and I knew something had happened.

They found him, Jerry," she went on, "sitting in his arm-chair in the study downstairs, with a quantity of papers all round him, and the doctor said he must have been dead some hours. Oh, Jerry!" in a trembling and awe-struck voice, "do you think it is possible that—that he could have seen him —my father, you know?"

"My darling," replied Gerard, not without a slight shudder, drawing her closer to him, "it's impossible to say; anyhow, it's a most extraordinary coincidence. But the doctors said it was heart disease, didn't they, and that it might have happened at any time?"

"Oh, yes," she returned, "and I'm sure he knew about it, for he has once or twice spoken to me about dying suddenly. But I am afraid I never thought much about it, and I can't tell you what a dreadful shock it was to me. I felt as if I was all alone in the world, and—you know what I mean, Jerry—you can't think how dreadful it has always been to feel as if I had never had

any father or mother, and as if there must be something wrong about me. I never dared ask about it since I was grown up, except once, and then Mr Baldwin told me that I should know some day, but that I had better not think about it or ask any questions in the meantime; and though he assured me there was nothing wrong, I couldn't help feeling that it wasn't all right. I have sometimes felt as if I should like to hide myself away somewhere, and never see any one again; for though people have always been very kind to me, I could see quite plainly sometimes that they were talking or thinking about it. And isn't it too sad to think that all those years I never knew who it was who used to come and stay with us? I used to wonder what made him so fond of me, and sometimes he would sit and look at me in such a strange, sad way. I once asked him if he had got any children, and he grew quite pale for a moment, and then he took my hand in his, and said I reminded him of a child he had once had. And to think that I shall never see his dear

kind face again!" And the soft brown eyes filled with tears, as she hid her face on her lover's shoulder, and gave way to a little quiet sorrow.

Now, too, for the first time, Gerard became acquainted with some of the particulars of Florence's early life. "Fancy, Jerry," she said, "it seems that I was born out there! But I can't remember anything whatever about it, for I was brought to England when I was about three years old. The first thing I can remember is being somewhere in the country, but it wasn't Netherdean, and there was a river, and boats, and all that sort of thing. It was somewhere up the Thames, I believe; but I wasn't there very long, and after that I was taken to Brighton, where I remained till I came to Netherdean. It was a sort of small school, and it was kept by two nice old ladies, who were very kind to me; but I wasn't very happy there, I think, and I didn't care much about the other girls. Mr Baldwin used to come and see me sometimes, but only just for an hour or so, and I was rather

frightened of him. They told me he was my guardian, and that perhaps some day I should go to live with him. Then one day, when I was about ten years old, I was told that another gentleman had come with Mr Baldwin, and when I went downstairs he was there, Jerry—my father. That was the first time I saw him, and even then I felt there was something about him quite different from any one else. He looked at me in such a tender, loving way, and then his eyes filled with tears, and he took me in his arms and kissed me, and asked me if I thought I should get to like him. He only came once again while I was there, but after I went to Netherdean he used to come almost every year, and stay some time."

It was inexpressibly sweet to Gerard to sit by Florence's side and listen to her half-shy, half-eager confidences respecting her past life; and sweeter still was it to watch the daily improvement that was apparent in her health and spirits, to see the colour returning to her cheek, and the scared, sorrowful look that

seemed to have taken possession of her features gradually giving place to an expression of rest and happiness.

"She has had a terrible shock, poor child," said Mrs Ashton to Gerard, "but she certainly seems to be getting over it wonderfully, and I must say I don't think I have ever seen her look so really happy before."

The crowning event of those happy days was Gerard's journey to London in company with Mrs Ashton and Florence. A renewed and pressing invitation had come from Lady Narborough on behalf both of herself and her lord, now restored to a tolerable degree of equanimity, expressing their desire to welcome Florence into the family at as early a date as possible. It was only fitting and natural that this ceremony should not be unnecessarily delayed, and it had been arranged, therefore, that Florence was to meet and be introduced to the Narboroughs in London, and then accompany them on a short visit to Easthampton.

An introduction to a new set of relations is

always a more or less trying and awkward affair. "I felt so dreadfully shy at first," said Florence to Gerard afterwards, "and as if I had no business there at all; but they were all so kind and nice, I soon felt at home with them. Lady Narborough is charming, and he was very kind too, though I couldn't help feeling a little frightened of him. But I think I shall like Lady Adelaide best of all, Jerry,—she is *quite* charming, and such fun too, I'm sure. She told me you and she were great friends, Jerry,—oh yes, I quite understand!" as Gerard, half laughing, half blushing, endeavoured to explain their quasi-relationship. "Yes, a very nice cousin to have indeed; but you needn't flatter yourself, sir, that I'm going to be jealous of her; and besides, she is going to marry your chief, so you will have to mind what you are about now. Isn't it funny, Jerry, that you and he should be going to marry two cousins? and you and I are almost a sort of cousins too, I suppose. Oh dear! how shall I ever get to remember that my name is Middleton and not Graham!"

London was beginning to fill, and the affairs of the Narborough family being still to a certain extent before the public, the double engagement of Lady Adelaide Middleton and her newly-found cousin Lady Florence to a well-known member of the Government and his private secretary excited no small stir in the fashionable world. Much curiosity was manifested regarding Florence, and Lady Narborough was besieged with inquiries about the new cousin and her romantic story. Public opinion, we regret to state, was not in favour of her engagement to Gerard; and it was held that he had as it were stolen a march upon society, which had some reason to complain of not being in a position to pass a verdict upon this new scion of the Narborough family before her affections had become engaged and her future sealed.

"Wonderful story, isn't it?" observed Colonel Scott to Mount-Easton, as he met him on the steps of White's one afternoon. "Do you remember our talking it over in the smoking-room last year at Bellmoor, and your asking

me whether there had ever been any doubt about his death? By Jove! it only shows what a keen, long-headed fellow old Brentford must have been. Why, it's just the very thing he foresaw when he wouldn't agree with the others, though of course every one laughed at him then. Anything in the evening papers?"

Gerard's first reception by Lady Adelaide after their respective engagements was extremely characteristic of that young lady. "Well, you're a nice young man, upon my word," she began, "to go and discover our new cousin in this sort of way, and then get engaged to her before any of us have had time to make her acquaintance! It's just about the coolest thing I ever heard of. I told her you wanted a lot of keeping in order, and that she mustn't stand any nonsense. Me engaged too? Well, what business is that of yours? You'd better be careful how you speak to me now, or I shall tell your chief. He says he doesn't think much of you as a private secretary, and could easily get a better one."

We are bound to confess, however, that they parted on the most excellent terms. "I told Florence you weren't a bad sort of boy on the whole, Jerry," she said, "and I think myself that you're uncommonly lucky," a sentiment that our friend was quite prepared to endorse.

CHAPTER XLV.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

Our story is drawing to a close; and having, indeed, piloted our hero through a series of modest adventures into the calm waters of matrimony, or, at any rate, within an appreciable distance of that highly honourable institution, beyond which it is not our purpose to follow him, we feel that we have no further claim upon the indulgence of the reader, beyond what is necessary to wind up the affairs of our remaining characters with a due regard to decency and good order.

It was only natural, having regard to the exceptional circumstances under which Lady Florence Middleton had been introduced to society, that rumour should have credited her with being a considerable heiress. It was asserted by some that the late Lord Narborough had, as Mr Montenello, amassed a

large fortune by land speculations in Venezuela, which had been invested in English securities for his daughter's benefit. Others spoke with confidence of charges on the Narborough estates that would have to be paid, with long arrears of interest, by the present Earl; while others whispered of sugar plantations and shares in silver mines that she would inherit from her mother. And all were agreed in the opinion that whatever property had been left by Mr Baldwin would certainly come to her.

These speculations were not, however, justified by the result. When, after a time, the position of the late Lord Narborough's affairs had been thoroughly mastered by the lawyers, it turned out that the property left by him was not likely to realise any considerable value. His will was found among Mr Baldwin's papers, in which he bequeathed everything to his daughter Florence. But as regards the much-talked-of Venezuelan property, it appeared that but little value was attached to it even by the owner. In a memorandum attached to the will, it was

stated that having, previously to his supposed decease, transferred a certain sum of money to America, he had embarked in some oil speculations which had succeeded in a most remarkable manner, and which had of themselves placed him in a position of independence. That having after a time decided upon settling in Venezuela, he had invested the greater part of his capital in the purchase and stocking of the estate of Los Angelos, and in the erection from time to time of a *hacienda* and other works and buildings; but that, on the whole, the enterprise had been a disappointment, and that, after thirty years spent in an endeavour to establish a settlement on a thoroughly substantial basis, he had been forced reluctantly to the conclusion that the unsettled state of the country and the unsatisfactory system of government rendered it improbable that after his death it would be carried on in the same manner with a reasonable prospect of success. The value of the land itself was little or nothing, and the only property worth realising would be the *hacienda* itself, and the live-stock, plant,

and buildings, which would doubtless command a certain price at the hands of any one who should be inclined to take over the estate as a commercial speculation. The testator requested, therefore, that Andrew Baldwin, Esq., of Netherdean, Wealdshire, and his nephew, the Earl of Narborough, whom he named as his daughter's trustees, should take such steps as seemed good to them, after due consultation with certain persons mentioned as authorities on such a matter, either to realise the available property at once, or to lease the estate to any suitable party who might be disposed to embark in it. A certain sum was to be set apart from the proceeds either of the lease or sale of the property, which was to be divided in legacies among a number of persons on the estate, whose names were specified in a schedule attached; and a more recent note was appended to the memorandum, recommending to the special care of the succeeding Earl of Narborough Joseph Diddums, formerly of Easthampton, but then residing at Los Angelos, in the event of his desiring to return to England. The

remainder of his property consisted, it appeared, of ten thousand pounds invested in various English securities, a special renunciation being made of all claim upon any personal property accruing from the Narborough estate, which it was desired should pass absolutely into the hands of his successor.

As regarded Mr Baldwin's property, it appeared that the greater part of his income had been derived from an annuity, and that the remainder of his personal property had been bequeathed to a nephew. The small freehold of Netherdean was left, as has already transpired, to Florence; but as this consisted merely of the house and about thirty acres of woodland and meadow, it could hardly be described as landed property of any importance. Still, although not absolutely an heiress according to modern ideas, Lady Florence Middleton was unquestionably the owner of a residence in Wealdshire, ten thousand pounds in good investments, and an estate in Venezuela of problematical value. To her and Gerard, in-

deed, being both in that blissful state when everything appears *couleur de rose*, such prospects appeared to open up a vista of untold riches; and the possession of Netherdean alone would have seemed to them to afford a sufficient provision upon which to commence their married life.

But perhaps the most deeply interesting to Florence of the various documents that were now brought to light was the record of the marriage of Francis Middleton of Easthampton, Wealdshire, England, to Isidora, daughter of Don Manuel da Silva, of New York and Havanna, which was stated to have taken place at the British Consulate at the latter town in the year 1853. The most complete evidence was forthcoming as to the legality of the ceremony, and little difficulty had been experienced in satisfactorily identifying Francis Middleton with Francis Earl of Narborough. In a few touching lines it was recorded how they had lived together at Los Angelos for six years, when Florence's birth took place, followed, within a few weeks, by the death of her mother. She had been buried at Caracas,

where they had been staying at the time, and where her husband desired that he himself might be laid by her side.

It had been decided that Florence and Gerard were to be married in July, by which time six months would have elapsed since Lord Narborough's death. In the meantime, Florence was to remain with Mrs Ashton, who had begged to be allowed to keep her till the last; and a move having been made to Portland Place, Gerard was placed in unrestricted communication with his *fiancée*.

"Oh, Jerry!" she exclaimed, as he arrived one evening from his office, "who do you think I have seen to-day? I told you about Mrs Caledon, who was my governess, you know. I have heard nothing of her for years, but I met her in Bond Street to-day, looking *so* handsome, and she has married again. She is Mrs Morton now, and she says that she thinks her husband knows you. Can it possibly be the Mr Morton you have told me so much about?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Gerard; "no, it

surely can't be; and yet, I don't know who else it could be. He hasn't got any brother, or any relation who could know me. No, I do believe it must be old George! Yes, I see it all now; she must have been his old love; he as good as told me he had had some affair of that kind, and had never got over it. But I can't make out why he didn't tell me something about it. Well, if it is him, it's a real good business, and I'm most awfully glad. But I must try and find out at once. She didn't tell you where they were staying, I suppose?"

"No, I quite forgot to ask her; how stupid of me! But I shall see her again soon, for she is coming here to tea on Thursday, and is to bring her husband; so you must be sure to come and meet her."

"All right," replied Gerard; "but I'll find out before that. They are sure to know at his old lodgings, and I'll go down there to-morrow. By Jove! now I think of it, the last time I was there, his landlady seemed

to think there was something up, but I never thought about it then."

It must not be supposed that our hero had all this time been altogether unmindful of his old friend. But he had not heard from Morton since his return from abroad, although he had written to him at his address at Starlington, and had called once or twice in Hatfield Street. He had, however, been unable to obtain any information there beyond the fact that Mr Morton had allowed his landlady to sub-let his rooms for six months from Christmas. Knowing his friend's peculiar disposition and habits, he had thought it best to leave him alone, feeling sure that he would hear of him again as soon as his affairs altered for the better.

"My darling, you were quite right," was his greeting to Florence as he appeared in Portland Place the following evening; "it's quite true, and the old lady is in a great state of excitement, 'been there with the lady, and introduced her,—so handsome, so nice,' and all that sort of thing; but she is

evidently rather divided in her mind between her admiration of Mrs George and her regret at losing such a good lodger. Well, I am glad it's all right with him at last, poor old boy; and only fancy her having been at Netherdean with you, too! How curiously things come round! Why, it was odd enough that old Martin should have lived with you, but this beats everything."

"I say, George, old fellow," said Gerard, as they got alone together, after the little *réunion* in Portland Place on the following Thursday, "you might have let me know about this; you must have thought me an awful brute not to take any notice of it, but how the deuce was I to know?"

"My dear boy," replied Morton, "I did write to you—about Christmas it was—but perhaps you didn't get the letter, as that must have been about the time you were in Venezuela."

"Ah, that's it, then," returned Gerard, reflectively. "I have no doubt it was forwarded to me, and is perhaps knocking about San Fernando now. I fancied I had missed

one or two letters about that time. Perhaps it will turn up yet."

And, sure enough, the letter did turn up, a fortnight later, together with half-a-dozen others, accompanied by a profuse apology from Sir Henry Turner, who explained that, owing to the carelessness or stupidity of a Creole clerk in the Governor's office, the letters which arrived for Gerard a day or two after he had left had been deposited in a pigeon-hole, where they had only been accidentally discovered some months later. "I take this opportunity," Sir Henry went on, "of congratulating you on your engagement, which I saw in one of the papers. I could not help fancying, when you came back from Venezuela, that there was something more in the matter than you cared to tell us just then; and this is a most interesting *finale* to your strange adventure. I expect to be in England next winter, and hope that we may then meet again, and that you will present me to your bride."

"But, George," continued Gerard, returning to the question of his friend's marriage, "tell

us how it all came about. I felt sure all along, you know, that there was some one in your affair as well as in mine, and I'm so awfully glad it's all right now. Fancy our each getting a wife from Netherdean, as it were! We didn't expect this that day we first saw Florence with the harriers, did we? But how did you manage it, eh?"

"Ah, well, it's a long story," replied Morton, with a smile—a peaceful, happy smile, so different from the weary, cynical look of old days—"but, in the end, I met her again by the merest accident. I had about given up all hopes of seeing her again when I took to the driving business, and it's curious that it should have come about through that after all. It was at the junction—Long Heaton, you know, where I met you that time. I was waiting for the south train one night, just the same as when I saw you. It was a pouring night, and I had got wet through in my last run, and was feeling pretty wretched and down on my luck. I was just loafing about on the platform as the train came

in, and was looking at the people in the carriages in a sort of stupid way, without thinking of anything in particular, when all of a sudden I caught sight of a face in a carriage window that made my heart stand still. Yes, there she was, sure enough; you could never mistake that face and that head of hers. And she saw me, too; and she knew me, God bless her, all wet and grimy and miserable as I was. I don't know what happened exactly, but she spoke to me, and she gave me her hand, and then the train went off. I don't know how ever I got to Starlington that night; if it hadn't been for old Zeke—my fireman, you know—there'd have been some awful smash. I couldn't see a signal, or anything, and we should have come to the most awful grief; but the poor old chap saw there was something wrong, and he just did the whole business himself. As soon as I got off duty, I went to the superintendent and asked for leave, telling him that something had happened, and that perhaps I mightn't come back again. He's a good

fellow, and squared it for me somehow, and I went off by the next train on the other line. She had told me where she was staying—near Bedford—and I was there next morning. Well, the long and the short of it is, Jerry, my boy, I found she hadn't forgotten me all these years, wretched devil that I was; and if ever there was an angel in this world, why, it's her. You've had an easy time of it, old chap, compared with me, and you can't quite understand what it is to be brought to life again as it were, after making up your mind that it's about all up with you."

"What a handsome couple they are, Jerry!" said Florence to her lover, as they stood together by the fire that evening after dinner, Mrs Ashton being engaged in writing a note in the next room. "Not *quite* so nice as us, of course," looking archly at the reflection of her own fair face in the glass. "But you know, Jerry, she's really much handsomer than me, and he—well, you're rather nice-looking, I must say; but he's much more the sort of man that women fall in love with than

you are, though perhaps you don't think so!"

This sally, of course, provoked a little lover-like demonstration from Gerard, after which the two stood looking into the fire for a few moments without speaking.

"Jerry," resumed Florence, inserting her arm through his, and clasping her hands in a meditative manner, "do you know, I've got an idea. I asked Mrs Caledon—Mrs Morton I mean—where they were going to live, and what they were going to do, and she said they hadn't settled anything for certain at present, but they had some thoughts of going abroad for a time. Now, why shouldn't Mr Morton go and live at Los Angelos? You said he had been in South America, and knew all about cattle-farming and that sort of thing; and he could live there, and keep up the place for us, and perhaps between us we might be able to carry it on. I should *so* like to keep it, if possible. I wonder if she could live there; of course, you know, my mother"—in a somewhat hushed voice—

"must have lived there, but then she was a Spaniard, and, of course, used to a warm climate. Oh, Jerry! to think that I never even saw her! I do hope we shall find that there is some picture of her somewhere. But it might do, mightn't it?"

"My darling, it's a splendid idea," replied Gerard, folding his arm round her waist, and kissing the little clasped hands as they rested on the mantelpiece. "Why, it would be the very thing for old George. I don't quite know about her, though; still, it's a charming house, and I believe it isn't a bad climate on the whole; and if she didn't mind being in such an out-of-the-way place for a time, it might do. We'll think it over, anyhow, and I'll sound George about it."

Lord Ravendale's marriage came off early in May, and was admitted on all sides to be one of the great social events of the year. Prominent among his attendant friends was the "Cadger," gorgeously attired, and wearing an expression eminently suited to the

occasion. He had apparently got over his supposed disappointment in regard to Lady Adelaide, and his present to her was conspicuous for its magnificence, even amidst the brilliant display that pretty well filled up the drawing-room in Eaton Square. But it is generally believed that his feelings have sustained an irreparable shock, and that he will live and die a bachelor.

"Good-bye, old fellow," said Lord Ravendale to his private secretary, as the latter hovered about to receive his chief's parting instructions; "it will be your turn next. Mind you keep him up to the mark, Lady Florence, or he'll perhaps take warning by me, and make a bolt of it, eh? However, I'll be back soon, and then I'll keep an eye on him for you."

It is hardly necessary to say that no one had taken a warmer interest in Gerard's good fortune than Lady Mount Easton.

"Well, Jerry," she said, when they met for the first time after the announcement, "I think you have really been most fortunate,

and I must say you have managed very well for yourself. After all, the Civil Service hasn't turned out so very badly for you, has it? But you see I was quite right in advising you to wait, for otherwise you might, perhaps, have never gone to Venezuela, and you might have spoiled the whole thing. So I think everything has turned out for the best, and you're a very lucky boy"—an opinion in which Gerard was only too ready to concur.

When Florence's proposal was made known to George Morton, his first thought was to decline on his wife's account. But, somehow or other, Constance herself was much taken with the idea, and declared that it would suit her admirably, that a warm climate had always been recommended to her, and that she could always come away for a change when necessary. So after much discussion, it was decided that the whole party should go out to Los Angelos together in the autumn, when Gerard could obtain sufficient leave for the purpose, and that if, after thorough inspection, it should appear to be

a suitable abode for Constance, the Mortons should take charge of the property for a year, and then see whether any permanent arrangement was likely to be a success.

Great was the excitement at the General Enquiry Office when the result of Gerard's expedition to San Fernando became known. The lost charter, it should be observed, had turned up in the most unexpected and mysterious manner about a month after his return. It was found one day lying on a side table in the chief-clerk's room, attached by a piece of red tape to a parliamentary blue-book, containing "Further Papers relating to the Maritime Jurisdiction of the Central African Republic," but how it got there was entirely beyond the power of any one in the office to say. The last-appointed junior clerk was, it is true, so devoid of consideration and knowledge of the world as to hint that it might possibly have been there all the time. This, however, was obviously a reflection, not only upon the chief-clerk, but upon the whole office, and no well-regulated mind could pos-

sibly have entertained such an idea for a moment. It is probable, therefore, that the affair will always remain a mystery, as has been the case with many other equally important and significant occurrences in the constitutional history of this country.

EPILOGUE.

It is a lovely evening in October—a loveliness not of autumn, however, but as of some mysterious blending together of spring and summer, that is altogether unknown in northern latitudes. For we are in the city of perpetual spring, as Caracas, their exquisitely-situated capital, is fondly termed by all true Venezuelans. A soft, golden light sheds its effulgence over the airy spires and russet roofs of the town, buried here and there in thick groves of cactus and orange, and illumines even the dark cypresses that hedge round a quiet little burying-ground on a hill-side, where the tinkle of the bells from a flock of goats up above, and the occasional shrill note of a bird, are all the sounds that strike upon the heavily-scented evening air.

Let us glance into a secluded nook, where

as yet the ground has hardly been disturbed, and where the luxuriantly-flowering shrubs straggle at will over the rocky ridges that crop up here and there above the emerald turf. It is not altogether untenanted, however, this little corner of "God's Acre," for here, girt round with a carefully-tended border of tropical flowers, with a plain slab of white marble at the head, and a little cross of the same material at the foot, is one solitary grave.

By it are standing two persons, their hands clasped in each other's, and apparently absorbed in silent contemplation. At last one of them looks up in her companion's face.

"My darling," she whispers, "I should like to be *quite* alone just for one minute; you won't mind, will you?"

He presses her hand, and walks away to the little stone wall that separates the cemetery from the open hill-side. He looks back for one moment, and sees a slender, graceful figure kneeling by the marble head-stone, a gleam of sunset casting a golden

glory over her soft brown hair. Then he leans over the wall, and gazes out upon the fair prospect around him. The goats advance in a semicircle, and stare at him curiously, but he heeds them not; and somehow, his eyes seem dim, and he can only distinguish a blurred outline of hill and grove, with a soft blue mist hanging over the city beneath. Suddenly a light footfall sounds behind him, and, turning round, Florence is once more by his side. There is a sweet smile on her face, though her eyes are brimming over with tears.

"I am quite ready now, darling," she says, softly, "but we'll just go back once more together." And, taking his hand, she leads him back to the grave.

* * * * * *

As they turn to go away, a golden ray of light strikes upon the headstone and some characters that are carved upon it. Near the top is one word only—

ISIDORA.

A little lower down is traced this inscription, which is evidently of more recent date—

FRANCĪS, EIGHTH EARL OF NARBOROUGH.

Born 10*th Sept.* 1809.

Died 19*th Dec.* 1879.

THE END

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